Shanghai’s Laoximen (old west gate) neighborhood, which lies in between the former French concession and the historic old city, is the perfect place from which to view the city’s ongoing process of transformation. While other parts of the downtown core seem somewhat settled, here one is still able to bear witness to the intensity of China’s contemporary urban transformation. Just a few blocks to the west of Laoximen lies Xintiandi, one of the richest areas of the city, while further to the east, near the river, is an area known as Dongjiadu. Demolition in Dongjiadu began in 2007 in the lead-up to World Expo. For many years, during the peak of the financial crises, however, little construction occurred. Migrant workers settled in, planting farms and gardens, and a vibrant market in food and textiles flourished amidst the rubble. By 2017, however, the cranes returned and the cluster of high-end commercial and residential buildings that form the ‘Dongjiadu Master Plan’ are again under construction. Between these two areas lies what remain of the narrow streets and low-rise structures of the older metropolis.

When I first moved to Laoximen in 2016 people came from miles around, attracted to the Zhaozhou lu night market, whose highlights included ‘Er Guang Hundun,’ a tiny shop specializing in peanut-flavored wontons whose tables spilled onto the sidewalk and which was famously visited by celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain on his televised trip to the city. Equally popular was ‘Lao Shaoxing Doujiang,’ an all-night stand cooking youtiao 油条 and doujiang 豆浆 (fried bread and soy milk) that attracted a mixture of locals who lined up in their pajamas as well as clubbers who dropped by in their fancy cars. In between these two stands that bordered the block was a cluster of other businesses, including a microbrewery, a skewer stand and a full Sichuanese restaurant. Tangjiawan, the oldest farmers market in the city, which was built in 1903, was located just around the corner.

As late as August 2016 the street was still lively – a stubborn hold-out from an earlier epoch. Yet just one month later the houses and shops were empty, the whole block was boarded up and the market was gone. Zhaozhou lu, which is poised between Xintiandi, one of Shanghai’s wealthiest neighborhoods, and the ‘old city,’ one of its poorest, has been slotted for redevelopment. By February 2017 the Tangjiawan market closed its doors. Today, a few formalized food trucks dot the area, ‘Er Guang Hundun’ has moved into a formal restaurant nearby, and youtiao and doujiang are only available in a fancy cafeteria in Xintiandi. Instead of street markets, the area is filled with the blue and white prefab walls that form the temporary housing for migrant workers. At night giant machines roar, like prehistoric beasts, devouring an older urban fabric. Construction is
hidden by vast billboards advertising the ‘sophisticated’ and ‘luxurious living’ complexes that are rapidly rising from the ground.

Laoximen is a vivid reminder that in trying to build itself as a future city, (Greenspan 2014; Wasserstrom 2008), Shanghai’s municipal leaders are operating with a model of development that views street markets and street life as backwards and uncultured; a past that needs to be ‘cleaned up’ and swept away (Brown 2006; Hansen, Little, and Milgram 2013). In the last decade government-sponsored clean-up campaigns have targeted vendors of all types. There have also been coordinated drives against hanging laundry and people wearing pajamas (an old Shanghai custom that, in the lead-up to the World Expo, was deemed uncouth). In the winter of 2016, the move to ‘civilize’ the city targeted the Chinese tradition of setting off fireworks to celebrate the New Year and welcome the god of wealth. Throughout the holiday period the custom was banned inside Shanghai’s outer ring road. The city launched a massive offensive, covering the streets with banners, employing 300,000 volunteers and setting massive anti-firework fines. A tradition that had chaotically erupted for centuries was abruptly silenced. Shanghai’s image of modernity is clean and well ordered. Maintaining this image requires a constant struggle against the unplanned, out-of-control messiness of street markets, street culture and street life (Solinger 2013; Olds 1997; Campanella 2012).

Modernist urban planning, which has typically called for regulation from above and insisted that city building was left in the hands of trained experts, has long been intent on the destruction of the street (Berman 1983; Caro 1974; Jacobs 1992). This top-down approach reached a pinnacle in the architectural writings of Le Corbusier. “The plan must rule,” he asserts in his articulation of the ‘City of Tomorrow,’ “the street must disappear” (Le Corbusier 1987). According to Le Corbusier’s vision, organic, chaotic and haphazard towns with their winding streets and alleyways would give way to a well-planned and tightly zoned city filled with manicured parks, high-rises and rationally ordered roads (Le Corbusier 1987). “Man walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he is going,” wrote Le Corbusier in his typically dictatorial style, “the modern city lives by the straight line” (Le Corbusier 1987). Likewise, in his work on the modernist city of Brasilia, a city planned without streets, urban theorist James Holsten details how the discipline of ‘urban organization’ viewed ‘the elimination of the street’ as a prerequisite. “The street,” writes Holsten, is “considered an impediment to progress because it fails to accommodate the needs of the machine age” (Holsten 1989: 248).

Faced with the modernist ambition to build the city of tomorrow, the mobile street vendor has found himself or herself as an explicit target (Cardoso, Companion, and Marras 2014). In his essay ‘Pushcart Evil,’ D. M. Bluestone documents how this situation has unfolded in America, where there has been a “centuries old efforts by municipalities to regulate and control street commerce” (Bluestone 1991: 68). The article begins in 1936, with a successful campaign in Manhattan to remove vendors from the streets by placing them in covered markets. In the name of ‘advancing social progress’ municipal officials hoped to mark the end of the pushcart, which they felt had “long outlived its usefulness in this day of modern, quick, sanitary distribution of foods” (Bluestone 1991: 68). This was not the first of New York’s pushcart bans, however. Bluestone points to an ordinance forbidding ‘street hucksters’ from as early as 1691 (Bluestone 1991).

Such urban policies, which take aim at the street vendor, are often quite explicit about their class-based motivation and strategies for control. (Cardoso, Companion, and Marras 2014). The clash between unregulated street vendors and a more ordered capitalist development is a means for the (often newly) wealthy to carve out zones of urban living that are separated from frequent and intimate contact with the urban poor (Fishman 1987). The aim of anti-street vending campaigns, argues Bluestone, was to “erase the vestiges of an older and decidedly less refined tradition
of urban commerce; at the same time extending upper-class ideals of public decorum and social separation to one of the least ordered spaces of the modern city – the street” (Bluestone 1991: 69).

Arvind Rajagopal, in his article ‘The Menace of Hawkers,’ tracks a similar process in Mumbai. His work conceptualizes the hawker (or phe ri wala) – whom, he notes, not only belongs to the informal economy but indeed provoked the concept itself – as “a contested figure of Indian modernity” (Rajagopal 2004: 236). By exploring the tensions between middle-class activists and the phe ri wala, Rajagopal shows how protests in favor of “clean streets and sidewalks, unobstructed movement of traffic” are used to delegitimize the “unruly energy” of an “older consumption aesthetic” (Rajagopal 2004: 236).

This same impetus, which has been particularly well documented in the case of India (Anjaria 2016; Bhowmik 2005) that equates urban development with a battle against the street, has also informed the modernizing processes of urban China. Di Wang, whose book Street Culture in Chengdu tracks this transformation in what is now the capital of Sichuan Province, details the enormously rich street culture of the pre-modern city. Everyday life for common people, who mostly lived in meager homes, happened largely outdoors. “Urban residents, especially the poor, used the street as their shared space for everyday greater freedom for various activities related to their livelihood and recreation,” he writes (Wang 2013: 2). From their beginnings, modernizing efforts in Chengdu were directed against this grassroots social life. Reformers “felt that how the street looked was an indicator of the city’s well being” (Wang 2013: 134) and “considered displays of traditional culture representative of the ‘old’ order and therefore ‘backward.’” Under the influence of a ‘Western-imitative civilization’ (wen ming) and ‘enlightenment’ (qim eng), municipal officials sought to “improve the streets and enhance the city’s image.” In the face of an onslaught of regulation “commoners had to struggle to maintain their claim to the street” (Wang 2013: 3).

Chengdu is just but one example. In her comprehensive essay ‘Streets as Suspect,’ Dorothy Solinger documents the many phases of the communist party’s hostile campaigns aimed against the informal culture and commerce of the street. “Streets – or to be specific, those who seek to situate themselves on them in order to earn their sustenance,” she writes, “are suspect in the eyes of the leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and have ever been so” (Solinger 2013: 3). The communist government’s adversity to an inherently out-of-control street life and street culture was evident from the start. “Immediately upon the entry of the victorious People’s Liberation Army into the major metropolises of the country in the second half of 1949, a ban was imposed on unregistered peddlers, along with one on beggars” (Solinger 2013: 6). In the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward there was a short-lived hiatus. For a few years street vending was permitted so as to counter the massive shortages brought on by the policies of centralized planning. Yet, as Solinger writes, these emergent markets “soon struck fear of a return of capitalism into the consciousness of the omnipotent Party chief, Mao Zedong” (Solinger 2013: 7). Soon after, an even stricter ban was imposed. During the decade of the Cultural Revolution informal vending all but disappeared. “Even while choking the streets with youthful parading and ravaging partisans,” Solinger notes, party policy “nonetheless erased all visible emblems of capitalism and its culture, rendering even the stuff of the tiniest outdoor fresh food marts contraband” (Solinger 2013: 7).

This familiar rhythm in which the strict control of street markets is followed by a loosening of power was again repeated in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (Solinger 2013; Dikötter 2016). Throughout the 1980s China witnessed a dramatic expansion of informal vending – this time tied to mass urbanization. By the early 1990s, however, as Solinger documents, the underlying suspicion against street markets once again resurfaced as the initial period of Opening and Reform (gai ge kaifang), which was driven primarily by a vibrant bottom-up sector of small, private entrepreneurs from the countryside giving way to a second phase geared
towards state-owned enterprises and giant multinational corporations (Y. Huang 2008). The country became obsessed with “nurturing giant firms and enticing international investors” and, as a result, policy “morphed from promoting markets of any kind (in the 1980s and most of the 1990s) to fostering colossal companies whose success was not to be undermined by the petty capitalists who would ply their trade outside” (Solinger 2013). The contemporary moment of tightening had begun:

Laid-off workers who had been free to ply service and commercial trades from 1998 to around 2003 without much interference were summarily hounded off the streets. Night markets were shut down or shunted onto the back-street alleyways in major cities, pavements in the heart of town were cleared of anything resembling business. Stall-keepers were herded into tall buildings, where, of course, their interactions with potential purchasers were necessarily cut back, as the passersby who might have been their customers were much less likely to go indoors than they were to stop by an outdoor stall to seek out what they needed.

(Solinger 2013: 17)

In Shanghai, as current developments around Laoximan clearly illustrate, the economic pressure against street-level trade has been further reinforced by the increasing importance of real estate development as the main source of revenue for municipal governments. This is a common dynamic. “Struggles for space,” writes John Cross, “are particularly acute in downtown areas, especially in cities where the local government and business want to ‘renovate’ urban areas for tourism or to increase local real-estate values” (Cross and Karides 2007).

In urban China, with its skyrocketing real estate prices, “local officialdom has taken to putting a very high premium upon ‘modernizing’ and ‘beautifying’ its visage (shirong urban appearance)” (Solinger 2013: 13). To take but one example, the night market on Sipailou Lu, a dense and crowded corridor just off the main thoroughfare of Fangbang Zhong Lu in Shanghai’s old city neighborhood, was, for many years, a particularly lively zone. The street, which was once the site of a Ming dynasty Confucian temple, evolved into a famous food market, where vendors – mostly migrants – sold everything from stinky tofu, big bone soup and fried noodles to barbecue skewers. The Sipailou market, however, was located just steps away from one of Shanghai’s main tourist attractions, the faux ancient Yuyuan garden. By the summer of 2016, prompted in part by the state-supported business that sell small snacks at Yuyuan, informal street vending in the old city was almost completely eradicated, as this area – like so many others in the downtown core – was slated to be ‘cleaned up,’ and redeveloped. Increasingly concerned about what they perceived as ‘world aesthetic standards,’ Shanghai has fostered a sensibility that held, as Solinger writes, that “city streets needed to be sanitized, scoured of the unsightly, especially emptied of those whose ‘suzhi’ or quality is thought to be inferior, whether unlicensed peddlers, migrants from the countryside, or, finally, the less educated workers thrown aside by their old employers in the state-owned firms after the mid 1990s” (Solinger 2013: 14). As the government sought to attract the eye of the investor, the urban thoroughfares came to be “reserved for the demolition teams and for the shopping sprees of the well-off; the very poor had no right to the city streets themselves” (Solinger 2013: 16). Contemporary Shanghai, then, has adopted a mainstream modernist legacy, which pits urban ‘progress’ against the informal markets of the street (Roy 2005; Portes, Benton, and Lauren 1989; Chen 2005). For the past decades, throughout the city, but especially in the urban core, street vendors and mobile stalls have been replaced with chain stores and shopping malls, and almost all the great clusters of street food in the downtown center have been lost.
Moveable Feasts

Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* viscerally depicts the layered nature of the cyberpunk vision of the future city. A flying craft drifts past super-tall skyscrapers illuminated by giant screens. As the craft floats past, the camera pans down, following the slope of a neon dragon advertising what lies below. It comes to rest in a dark and rainy alley where the hero Deckard sits perched at a noodle stall. Though *Blade Runner* was set in Los Angeles 2019, it was filmed on location in 1980s Taipei. Today, the film is a striking early recognition that the Asian metropolis, with its dense and complex strata, is vital to the imagination and creation of our now global urban future. Critical to the intensity of this urban imaginary is that alongside the flying cars and illuminated towers, there are also the smells, sounds and tastes of street food.

My work on Shanghai’s street snacks was sparked by an increasing apprehension that, as the city emerges as a twenty-first-century hub, the rich and layered nature of its urban fabric is being destroyed. In line with a modernist agenda – already centuries old – that sees control of the street as central to economic progress and urban development (Bluestone Daniel 1991; Holston 1989; Berman 1983), Shanghai is replacing its alleyway noodle stands with brightly lit fast food chains and shopping malls. It does so with the paradoxical aim to ‘catch up’ with the idealized (and homogenous) vision of a global city that has already established itself elsewhere (Roy 2009).

The project Moveable Feasts began in June 2013 with a call to “designers, artists, scholars, students and foodies of all types to come map, document, co-create, re-invent and preserve Shanghai’s street food.” The initial brainstorming meeting was held in Shanghai’s first hacker space, Xinchejian. Those gathered noted with some alarm that whereas street food elsewhere was being celebrated with food trucks, ‘vendy awards’ and reality TV, the culinary culture of Shanghai’s *xiaochi* (small snacks) was under threat. Moveable Feasts was established with the aim “to research, savor, catalogue, preserve, and engage with the city’s rich street food heritage.” In the spring of 2015, after connecting with Krishnendu Ray’s project on City Food based at New York University (NYU), Moveable Feasts was developed into a digital humanities classroom–based project that focused on the tools of critical cartography (Kim 2015; Cosgrove 1999) in order to map the city’s changing street food landscape (www.sh-streetfood.org). Small groups of student researchers, both Chinese and foreign, worked together to map over 200 vendors and, through interviews and other modes of embedded research, uncover the stories from the streets: Who are the vendors and where are they from? What are their working conditions? What kinds of spaces do they inhabit, and what types of spatial arrangements do they make possible? What opportunities are open to them? What challenges do they face? What are their ties to other vendors, to the neighborhood and to the food that they cook and serve?

The pages that follow examine three interrelated contexts which shape the contemporary street food landscape in Shanghai: 1) high-speed urbanization, 2) internal migration and 3) the life and culture of the street. Drawing on the research conducted for Moveable Feasts, it shows that street food provides an intimate lens onto the vast cultural and socioeconomic transformations underway in Shanghai, as one of the largest and fastest-growing cities in China aims to forge itself into the model of a modern metropolis of the twenty-first century.

Urbanization

Shanghai, as I have written elsewhere (Greenspan 2014), was by the beginning of the millennium at the forefront of the fastest and most intense process of urbanization the world has ever known (Khanna 2010; Saunders 2010). “A third of the world’s population is on the move this century,” writes author Doug Saunders. Yet unlike the wave of urbanization that accompanied
the modernization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this time the “flows are almost all occurring in the so called ‘developing world’” (Roy 2009). Throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, the villages of the countryside are emptying out. In 2007 the threshold was crossed. For the first time in history fifty percent of the world’s population are urban dwellers (McNeill 2007). Megacities are mushrooming everywhere. National Geographic reports that in 1950 New York was the only city in the world with a population over ten million; by 2015 there are over thirty of these giant cities (Zwingle and Franklin 2002). “The age of nations is over,” contends Parag Khanna in Foreign Policy’s 2010 special issue Metropolis Now. “The new urban age has begun” (Khanna 2010). Nowhere is the global transformation from rural to urban life more intense than in China, where urbanization is faster and larger than ever before (Campanella 2012). In 1980 under twenty percent of China’s population lived in its cities. Today it is over forty percent. Government officials predict that the urban population will surpass 700 million in the next five years, exceeding the number of rural dwellers for the first time. McKinsey Global forecasts that by the year 2030 there will be a billion people living in Chinese cities (McKinsey & Co. 2009). Almost one-third of contemporary Shanghai’s approximately twenty-five million people are migrants, with almost eighty percent of those arriving from the Chinese countryside.

The high-speed process of urbanization that has shaped the country in the past decades has been enormously dependent on the informal economy (Huang 2009), which not only can provide a livelihood for the undocumented but also constitutes an “alternative culinary infrastructure” that can produce and distribute low-cost goods and services. Most importantly, street vending is not very capital-intensive and is also a business that can be easily set up with family and friends. In the most primitive of urban markets, in Shanghai as elsewhere, new vendors need only a blanket and a basket of goods. Street hawking therefore offers an attractive entrepreneurial opportunity for the newly urbanized, and this mode of informal entrepreneurship is crucial for the urban poor both as consumers and as producers (Neuwirth 2012; Hart 1973; Soto 2002; Portes, Benton, and Lauren 1989). In China, as entrepreneurial migrants poured into the coastal cities, they often turned to the business of street food in the hope of enriching both themselves and their families back home.

In cities across the country, one of the most popular of these regional delicacies is the Shandong jianbing (egg pancake) – a thin crepe that is cooked on an iron griddle and garnished with fresh herbs, pickles and dried chili. The crepe is most often filled with an egg, smeared with various sweet and spicy sauces and wrapped around a flat, crispy fried cracker. While hawkers selling this tasty breakfast snack are found in almost every urban neighborhood, most, as two of my students discovered, originate from the same tiny village called Youlou, which is located in the remote mountain regions of Shandong Province (Chen and Roscoe 2015). Until very recently, Youlou suffered from extreme poverty, relying on the growing and harvesting of honeysuckle as the primary form of income. Starting in the 1990s, however, villagers started to migrate, gravitating towards an entrepreneurial life as jianbing sellers on the streets of China’s first-tier cities. They adapted the traditional snack to local taste and modified the cooking style of the crepe by heating it on a makeshift oil barrel stove so that it was faster and easier to prepare. They also found ways to adjust the taste so that it would appeal to local urban residents (in Shanghai this involves adding a sweet, syrupy sauce). Soon the jianbing industry exploded. The pancake became a wildly popular breakfast snack in the exploding megacities of China. Today a database known as the Youlou People’s National Network connects migrant villagers who want to find good locations for their jianbing stands. It also provides lists of different recipes that appeal to the varying tastes of the different regions throughout China. In Shanghai, jianbing stands, which can still be found tucked into the back alleys of even the busiest roads, are one of the city’s great culinary delights. Villagers from Youlou monopolize the trade in jianbing and have generated millions of renminbi,
transforming their own lives, as well as paying for housing and infrastructure in their hometown. One woman, when asked about the changes in her village from the trade in jianbing, replied simply by saying: ‘Now the village is crazy rich.’

Migration

In the spring of 2014, outside the campus of East China Normal University, near the durian sellers and the young men roasting Xinjiang kebabs, a couple from the far north city of Harbin set up to sell squid off the back of a three-wheeled bike. Their bike was equipped with a table upon which they carefully laid out tentacles and body parts of various sizes. A large banner advertised the prices: from 3 RMB for a stick of tentacles to 10 RMB for a whole squid. Flavor was added from an array of bottles filled with a variety of spices. These and the iron grill, claimed the woman, are the specialty of Harbin. The woman’s face was hard, and she chain smoked while she spoke. The man was softer, silent. Both wore crisply starched white chef hats. They left their job a year ago selling vegetables in the wet market, the woman told me, in order to migrate to Shanghai. “In Harbin life was too hard, it was too cold. Your spit froze before it hit the ground.”

Shanghai is a migrant city (Lu 1999; Wasserstrom 2008; Bergère 2009). Like all deeply cosmopolitan places, its cuisine is hybrid. Common dishes include mutated imports like the breaded pork cutlets (zha zhu pai 炸猪排) served with Worcestershire sauce, which spread from the European restaurants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and are now found in noodle and dumpling shops around town, as well as more internal hybrids like the Sichuanese spicy tofu (mapo dofu 麻婆豆腐) that has been toned down and sweetened to appeal to local tastes. The city’s street food or small snacks (xiao chi 小吃) are enormously rich and varied. Moveable Feasts’ ‘street food encyclopedia’ reflects this culinary hybridity. Alongside the famous soup dumplings (xiao long bao 小笼包) from the Zhejiang region are roast meat sandwiches (rou jia mou 肉夹馍) from Shaanxi, lamb skewers (yang rou chuan 羊肉串) from Xinjiang, egg tarts (cha ye dan 茶叶蛋) from Macau, candied hawthorn (bing tang hu lu 冰糖葫芦) from the north and breakfast crepes (jian bing 煎饼) from Shandong. Due to its migrant culture, the tastes from all over China can be found on the streets of Shanghai.

As a port city, Shanghai has long been transformed by flows of people from around the country, and the world. Each successive wave of immigration sees their food assimilated and synthesized. It began with the initial native Shanghaiese who originated mostly from nearby Zhejiang and Jiangsu Provinces, out of which developed the foods that are considered Shanghai’s signature dishes. During the treaty port era, Shanghai drew immigrants from new, more far-flung, regions, who have brought recipes and tastes that subsequently shaped and were shaped by the distinct Shanghai flavor (Wakeman and Yeh 1992).

Shanghai’s current migrants date from the era of Opening and Reform. Throughout the decades of the planned economy, movement inside the country was largely stopped. In the Socialist era, both people and food were locked in place by the rigorous enforcement of the hukou system, which was explicitly designed to regulate population flow, allowing internal migration only when the state directed it towards key industrial targets (Fan 2008). By controlling the distribution of work, housing and especially food (through the rationing of grain, oil, meat and vegetables), the hukou system was extremely effective at locking the population in place. With the growth of the free market, the hold of the hukou lessened. In its wake came a wave of unprecedented urbanization. Nevertheless, the hukou system, which still ties a variety of social benefits to one’s place of birth, has remained at the heart of population management in China (Fan 2008; Zhu 2007). In China, migrants – even those who have lived in the city for decades – ‘float’ between the villages where their birth is registered and the emerging metropolis, which they help to construct. Bound
at once to the city and also to another, often distant, locality, this ‘floating population’ occupies a precarious in-betweenness that is reshaping the very process of urbanization itself. The *hukou* system thus reinforces traditional cultural ties to the ancestral home, ensuring that migrants — even those who have lived in the city for decades — are bound to another, often distant, locality, which intensifies the already strong regionalism that shapes the city’s culinary culture. This is perhaps most apparent among the Uighur population who come from the western province of Xinjiang. Their religious injunction to eat only halal, coupled with a profoundly distinct local food culture, was further supported — at least until recently — by a relatively permissive policy regarding street vending among ethnic minorities. The result is that every Friday afternoon around Shanghai’s main mosques, the Uighur community host Muslim markets, which are among the most popular and distinctive of Shanghai’s street food events.

The inherent conflict between loyal attachment to a distant native place and pride in a new identity as *Shang hai ren* (Shanghai people) has long been the hallmark of the Shanghai sojourner (Wakeman 1992). This ongoing tension, as Mark Swislocki has noted in his book *Culinary Nostalgia*, is what defines Shanghai’s food culture. On one side is *Ben bang cai*, the deeply local cuisine served in family-style restaurants that is determined by the particular tastes of the Shanghainese. On the other is the heterogeneity of *hai pai cai*, which is born instead out of intermixing and continuous contamination and is productive of the innovation and adoption of a deep culinary and cultural hybridity. In his book, Swislocki contends that at the heart of the *hai pai cai—ben bang cai* debate is the quintessential Shanghai question: Is it locals or migrants who define the city’s soul (Swislocki 2009)? The cultural problematic plays itself out through the tastes of the urban street, whether in the sweet-tasting sauce added to the *jian bing*, the huge popularity of nighttime barbecue stands or the deep loyalty to pot sticker dumplings (*sheng jian bao* 生煎包), which some argue are Shanghai’s only original street food.

**The life and culture of the street**

According to scholar Samuel Liang, China’s version of the modern street was a product of Shanghai’s quintessential architecture, the *li long* with its stone gate (*shi ku men* 石库门) lane-houses. Traditionally in China, he argues, residential and commercial spaces were strictly divided. Urban geography was hierarchically constructed, with a physical, psychological and sociological gap forming a boundary between the more honored, peaceful and protected ‘house mansion–palace centred on the courtyard’ and the more chaotic and crass ‘shop along-the-street.’ “The courtyard and the street,” writes Liang, “were antithetical spaces separated by walls: the one represented the elite order and the other the amorphous and vulgar; the one was the centre and the other always was marginalised in Confucian ideology” (Liang 2008: 491). The *li long*, Liang contends, reversed this spatial hierarchy. As the city grew, many *bilongs* built on the periphery came to occupy highly valued downtown land. Economic necessity thus ensured that their outer façade be given over to commercial activity. Shanghai lane-houses were typically bounded by rows of shops, at the back of which was a wall enclosing the residential area. Rather than try to remove themselves from the busy streets their outer edges produced, the *shi ku men* opened themselves to this intrinsic exteriority of the modern city. Instead of facing inward into the courtyard, the space of traditional domesticity, *shi ku men* houses had upper-story windows that looked out onto the street and alleyways. Shanghai’s architecture thus turned the traditional courtyard house inside-out. In the *li longs*, everyone could see and be seen by others, as if the city were one busy street. In Shanghai, then, the walls that had long closed off the private space of the family weakened, and life inside the home became increasingly integrated with the surrounding streets and shops.
Critical to these new urban spaces were the myriad micro-businesses that were housed within the lanes. The li houses, writes Liang were “provisional lodgings centering on business activities. To pay high rents and sustain an expensive urban life, a house was used not only as a home, but as a space that facilitated the constant flow of capital” (Liang 2008: 494). Though they were intended as purely residential then, the li longs were thoroughly ‘mixed use’ from the start, as historian Hanchao Lu details (Lu 1999). In and among the hybrid housing were factories, schools, traditional Chinese banks, warehouses, bathhouses, fortune tellers, restaurants, law offices, medical clinics, even government bureaus and Buddhist temples. With the li longs, street food was embedded into the very fabric of Shanghai’s built environment. Streets in residential neighborhoods were crowded with small stores selling food, clothing and household goods, small ‘proletarian’ restaurants and the ever-popular yan zhi dian tobacco and paper stores that marked the entrance to practically every lane. There were silk and tea wholesale stores, bookstores and publishing houses. Inside the alleyways, dozens of hawkers gave life its color and rhythms. The most common and popular goods were Shanghai’s famous xiao chi (snacks), which “were advertised with a song and often served from portable kitchens, which street peddlers carried on a pole” (Lu 1999: 209).

When modernization is pitted against street life and street culture, it is not only the livelihood of vendors that suffers but also the liveliness of the city itself. Indeed, it is precisely the out-of-control vitality that the modernist vision of the future city most strives to contain. Planners opposition, argues J. Holsten in his work on the modernist city, is directed not at a type of place, but more critically at a mode of social life that the street engenders. Streets, he notes, create ‘outdoor rooms’ by ‘stealing’ the facades of surrounding buildings. These open spaces – radically different from a public square – foster “the informal interactions between people, residence, commerce and traffic” upon which the life of the city thrives. The corridor street and the sidewalk, “the traditional ribbon of exchange,” thus constitutes the architectural context of outdoor public life that is able to flourish outside the rigidities of the private home and the public institution (Holston 1999).

“Cities are their streets,” writes Adam Gopnik in his recent review of a new biography of the great urban anti-planner Jane Jacobs. “Streets are not a city’s veins but its neurology, its accumulated intelligence” (Gopnik 2016). In her canonical book The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jacobs presents a view of the city grounded in the material reality of the street. Death and Life looked to real cities to find what worked. “I shall be writing about how cities work in real life,” Jacobs states from the start, “because this is the only way to learn what principles of planning and what practices in rebuilding can promote social and economic vitality in cities, and what practices and principles will deaden these attributes” (Jacobs 1961: 4). By looking, listening and learning from the street, Jacobs discovered that the most vibrant urban neighborhoods were precisely those that the modernists were eagerly clearing away. In the messiness of older urban neighborhoods, Jacobs saw the successful workings of a complex and diverse system, which assembled itself from the ground up, and was thus totally at odds with the planners’ desire for perfect control. The dense and frequent market transactions of the so-called slums were critical to the vibrancy, livability and even safety of the modern metropolis. In replacing the chaos of the streets with the pristine organization of well-planned high-rises and parks, modern urban planners were, Jacobs maintained, guilty of a deep anti-urbanism: “anti-city planning,” she called it. Blind to the ‘street dance’ made from the intimate rhythms of everyday life, the modernists were destroying the productivity and human interaction so crucial to urban innovation. Their reverence for imposed order was instead producing vast tracks of desolate spaces empty of life. “This is not the rebuilding of cities,” she wrote emphatically. “This is the sacking of cities” (Jacobs 1961: 39).

More recently, Sharon Zukin, Philip Kasinitz and Xiangming Chen, in their book Global City, Local Streets have built on Jacobs’ work by exploring and celebrating local shopping streets as
miniature marketplaces that thrive in megacities throughout the world. Local streets, they argue, function as global urban habitats, spaces where “globalization is embedded in local communities.” They imbue neighborhoods with a special character. A neighborhood’s DNA, they argue, “is encoded in the ecosystem of the local shopping street” (Zukin et al. 2014: 1). In much of the world these shopping streets support – as business owners, employees and customers – a culturally diverse population. They are “spaces of every day diversity” encouraging a “civility amongst strangers,” which the authors call a “corner shop cosmopolitanism.” Celebrating local shopping streets for their economic, social and environmental merits, *Global City, Local Street* views these grassroots zones as essential to the construction of a human-scale, safe, walkable and bikeable city.

These urban spaces foster a culinary culture that nurtures a particular social engagement. In addition, and perhaps even more importantly, it is by way of street food that the body most intensely inserts itself into the urban landscape. With food, the daily rhythms of our embodiment shape the city streets. Corners and sidewalks that offer the smells, sounds and tastes of cooking provide pockets of sensuality, which can provoke memory and nostalgia, stimulate visceral feelings of revulsion and disgust, energize with pleasure or satisfy with comfort (Low 2015; Low 2005; Farrer 2017). Food on the street is thus the guarantor of city life.

A growing number of urban theorists are becoming increasingly cognizant of the importance of street life in the twenty-first-century megacity. In part this stems from a realization that despite the predictive modernist notions, which hold that unplanned markets and itinerant vendors necessarily ‘evolve’ into a more regulated commercial sector, the informal economy has persisted in cities around the world, regardless of the level of economic ‘development’ (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014). Whereas many once believed that “street markets and bazaar culture belong to an unindustrialized, pre-modern identity,” write Bell and Loukaitou-Sideris, “informal income-generating activities are on the rise in many urban centres around the world, including in highly developed and urbanized nations” (Bell and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014). In contrast to the idealized, glossy vision of the future city with its sparkling shopping malls and banners advertising ‘sophisticated and luxury living’ that so many of Shanghai’s planners and officials advocate, “the ‘post-modern or global city’ as Cross and Karides note, is characterized by the dual forces of gentrification, on the one hand, and a rise of the informal sector in which vendors play a vital role on the other. “The small or micro-businesses operated by street vendors are struggling, to be sure, but they are hardly at the fringe of contemporary society” (Cross and Karides 2007). Indeed, vending has emerged as a hotly debated issue in major cities around the world:

Somehow, in the modern global liquid economy, the vendor now figures in the city not only physically but in the public imagination more than before. Unlike the derision of vendors in the first historic wave of urbanization at the turn of the 20th century in the western world (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009), many cities now highlight vending as an amenity in the visioning of a vibrant city, like kiosks in a shopping mall, a “vending urbanism.”

*(Bostic, Kim, Valenzuela, 8)*

**Conclusion: whither Shanghai’s street food?**

In Laoximen, amidst the dense network of the old city’s remaining low-rise structures, there is now a patchwork of vast empty squares. Blocks that just a short time ago held thriving markets have been plowed over. Shanghai’s battle against the street, which uses the tools of legality, order, safety, cleanliness and beautification to crack down on vending of all types, rages on.
Nevertheless, there are some potential inklings that in China too, as Jonathan S. Bell and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris have written, attitudes towards “street vending is at a crossroads” (Bell and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014: 231). Perhaps there is still a chance that street food can continue to play a vital role in maintaining the liveliness and livability of China’s future cities, Bell and Loukaitou-Sideris note in trying to make their case that a “number of academic, professional, and even official voices have called for toleration” (Bell and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014: 239). These supporters, they write, point to increasing protests against chengguan (the municipal officials who are tasked with urban management) who are widely criticized for their brutality (Richardson 2012). Calls for increased toleration draw on the examples of Taipei (Chiu 2013) and Singapore (Ghani 2011; Henderson et al. 2012) to argue for the cultural value of street markets, which constitute a “form of living urban heritage worthy of preservation” (Bell & Loukaitou-Sideris 230).

The strong economic case for street vending also seems to be gaining some traction (Bell and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014: 231). Faced with an increasing economic downturn and the need to create jobs, the Chinese government – under a policy named Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation (大众创业、万众创新) – is actively promoting small-scale entrepreneurial activity as a critical economic driver. Street food is sometimes included. The much-loved Menghua wonton shop, whose closure was met with protest, to give one high-profile example, was allowed to continue its operations in a more formalized outpost due to the intervention of Premier Li Keqiang, who argued that it should be considered a prime example of the ‘mass entrepreneurship’ that the state is so eager to promote. Shanghai’s city government has also recently announced a policy to learn from Taipei and open night markets in several districts of the city, though what shape these will take has yet to be determined. More interesting still is the fact that as street life retreats from physical space it resurfaces in cyberspace as apps and social media link up with the logistic networks of delivery services to remap the landscape of urban exchange. I learnt of this first from a friend who had set up a successful business selling her aunt’s rice dumplings (shao mai 烧卖) through a ‘store’ on the immensely popular social media app WeChat. A more prominent example is the story of Mr. Wu Gencheng, a famous hawker, who sells the most popular scallion pancakes (cong you bing 葱油饼) in Shanghai. Last year, his stall, Ada Scallion was shut down for operating without a license. It was saved, however, when a well-known food delivery app, E le ma, helped sponsor Mr Wu’s licensing and relocation. Li Keqiang also appealed directly on its behalf. Yet another example is A Xin Noodle House now on Yangdang Lu, which had to relocate to a fancier location when its largely outdoor stand on Zhaozhou lu was shut down. The many fans of the chef, however, can now ‘friend’ him on WeChat and have his famous crab delivered straight to their door. It seems then that street food’s long-held traditions and unexpected innovations that arise through the unplanned hybridity, unpredictable entrepreneurship and creative everyday culture of the street has spread to a virtual environment. As Moveable Feasts continues its project of deep-mapping the informal megacity, the issue of how street food and street culture are being redrawn in cyberspace will be one of the main questions it pursues.

Notes

1 I was first introduced to Zhaozhou Lu by Jamie Barys of Untour Shanghai (https://untourfoodtours.com/).
2 See: www.sh-streetfood.org/features/
3 This formulation comes from food studies Jeffery Pilcher.
5 This formulation comes from food studies scholar Krishnendu Ray.
Bibliography

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