BOOK REVIEW
Harriet Evans, *Beijing from Below: Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Center* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020)

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Reading Harriet Evans's *Beijing from Below* is a moving experience of being invited into an old Beijing neighborhood and entering a dense web of relations. The monograph, drawing on a mixed method of archival research, oral history and ethnographic fieldwork going back to 2004, restores the lived experience of Dashalar, a poor neighborhood just south of Tian'anmen Square. In a span of over ten years, the region has transformed from a dilapidated neighborhood under mass demolition and relocation to a gentrified commercial district, rendering local residents further invisible. Taking these residents as "subaltern populations" in a structural condition of precarity and scarcity, this book is a painstaking effort to recover their voices from illegibility and test the limit of narrating urban history from marginalized positions. By listening closely into those occluded stories in the capital's center, the book is a wonderful addition to a growing body of site-based studies of bottom-up urban experience behind China's global rise.[1]

The scope of this monograph is at once focused and expansive, featuring oral narratives of a single neighborhood while interweaving themes of gender, family, memory, ethics, urban development, and methodological reflections on oral history and subaltern historiography. Drawing a memory map of Dashalar from the 1930s to the 2010s, the book is first and foremost about the ways in which local residents navigated poverty and marginalization with dignity and agency. Based on extensive oral history accounts from six households, the book makes visible the power dynamics within Dashalar: there, the reader comes into contact with figures such as an old lady who has turned her lifelong sufferings into sources of virtue and respect, an unemployed man shouldering family care, a single mother and a migrant couple perceived as outsiders of the neighborhood, and a businessman and another couple who have benefited from China's market reform. By mapping out the uneven, dynamic tensions among these figures as well as their complicity with the state, Evans paints a complex picture of the internal ecology of Dashalar and acutely points out that subalternity cannot be reduced into a clear-cut, singular position.

As Dashalar has radically changed by the end of 2010s, the multiple temporalities occupied by this project are noteworthy. To be clear, the decade in which Evans carried out this project coincided with the height of China's neoliberal economic development and forcible urban demolitions around the 2008 Beijing Olympics.[2] Despite Evans's decision to tell the stories of Dashalar in the past tense (xi), the book preserves at once a feeling of future anterior when the neighborhood was doomed to be displaced; an impulse of being present as Evans navigates her role in the process; and a present perfect continuous tense as the people from Dashalar continue to live with the aftereffects of demolitions and other episodes of modern Chinese history. As such, the value of this book is critical: like many documentaries that have come out of the same period of urban demolitions,[3] the book is both an archive of an era, a people, a neighborhood, a city and, as Evans emphasizes herself, "an ethical as much as a historical task of recognition" (224) that attests to subaltern ways of living and making do amidst structural changes.

Careful thoughts are given to the structure of this book, which reflects its ethical and analytical engagement. Unlike conventional monographs, the book is organized in seven chapters, with six interludes in-between. After the first chapter maps out the history of Dashalar in the past half century, each main chapter—sometimes in descriptive accounts and other times in direct quotations—forms an oral history narrative devoted to everyday family stories and named after the key person of that household. Following each main chapter, an interlude offers the author's analytical discussions. As Evans explains in the book, this unique structure is inspired by Susan Mann's *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* and the monumental work of the Han historian Sima Qian, which both set examples of keeping historical narratives apart from the author's interpretation.[4] In effect, this narrative structure not only embodies an ethics of close listening into the life experiences featured by the book, but also allows Evans to write "in a way that could respect the singularity of the narrative style" (18) used by each interlocutor. At the same time, analytical rigor is not sacrificed. By situating individual stories within a broader context of gender, family, memory, agency, and urban transformation in modern Chinese history, the interludes provide excellent framings for understanding the implications of these stories beyond the neighborhood itself.

As Evans listens carefully to the details fleshed out in her interlocutors' accounts, each narrative chapter may stand on its own like an old Beijing courtyard inviting the reader to enter the life of Dashalar and savor rich analytical insights. In

Chapter 2, Evans introduces the reader to Old Mrs. Gao, a resilient lady who has lived through wars, hunger, poverty, political turbulence, sickness, and housing uncertainties in her life. Evans's vivid descriptions of quotidian objects such as a small wooden box with cigarettes, lighter and tissues kept by Old Mrs. Gao, as well as pictures of Old Mrs. Gao's unassuming home, create an intimate sense of materiality and emplacement for the reader to imagine the sensorial experience of living in Dashalar. What's more, much attention is also given to the *sonic* reconstruction of Old Mrs. Gao's thick Beijing accent, which is reflected through Evans's excellent translation and preservation of the original text in her quotations. By detailing how Old Mrs. Gao has transformed long years of hardship into her strength and determination to keep her family united, Evans makes a cogent case for reading historically contingent agency out of material precarity.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at two figures who are more disadvantaged and have both appropriated gendered expectations for recognition. Chapter 3 tells the story of Zhao Yong, a laid-off worker looking after his mentally ill mother. As Evans interprets, the materially disadvantaged position of Zhao Yong has led him to appropriate masculine authority as a means for social recognition. As such, we come to understand Zhao Yong's heavily masculine dispositions—such as speaking loudly to his wife and claiming authority of his own opinion—as a performance of gendered agency against his marginalized status. By comparison, Hua Meiling in Chapter 4 is a single mother who grew up in a harsh environment of domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, and prostitution. Influenced by these early experiences, she has to navigate multiple challenges including alienation in the neighborhood, job precarity, tensions with her family, and her relationship with a lover. The exercise of gendered agency is once again prominent, as Meiling switches her role between an independent breadwinner and a lover desiring for male protection. To understand the ways in which both Zhao Yong and Hua Meiling identify with conservative ideas of male authority, Evans puts forwards a helpful concept, "patchy patriarchy," which suggests "an uneven reconfiguration of ideas and practices centering on, though not limited to, assumptions about marriage, reproduction, family, kinship, and female virtue, ordered by an inextricable mix of culturally familiar gendered and generational obligations" (219).

Chapter 5 features the story of Li Fuying and his wife Zhang Yuanchen, the only migrant family Evans came to know well in Dashalar. To escape gang violence from their rural hometown, the couple made their way to Beijing but their lives were never easy. From their early days of being sent to detention as undocumented migrants to patrol officers' confiscation of their unlicensed pedicab, from their isolation in the neighborhood to their pain of being abandoned by their better-off son, the couple has carried the cost of economic precarity, social exclusion, familial rupture, and urban uprootedness as outsiders of the city. Linking their struggles with a more recent wave of mass evictions in Beijing in late 2017, this chapter makes legible a violent paradigm of urban development that lives on "low-end" (*diduan*) migrant populations while excluding them as undesired subjects of the city. Much more than a local or national problem, the question at stake is a larger issue in regards to the production of disposable lives in the extractive system of global neoliberal capitalism. By re-entering the city through the eyes of Li and Zhang, then, this chapter not only illustrates how the peripheral migrant populations are making do, but also pushes one to ask what accounts for the justice of urban governance.

In contrast to the figures above who have been excluded from the material benefits of China's economic rise, Chapters 6 and 7 take a turn to tell the stories of individuals who have gained from this process. In Chapter 6, Evans presents the experience of Zhang Huiming, a physically disabled woman receiving government pension and allowance, and her husband Wang Wenli, a state-licensed pedicab driver who is able to benefit from local heritage tourism. With stable incomes, the couple managed to not only enjoy a relatively comfortable life but also cultivate a cultural interest in calligraphy. In Chapter 7, the reader meets Jia Yong, a local restaurant owner and photographer who is arguably the most complex figure in the book. As Evans observes, the success of Jia Yong comes from both his personal talent and his relative advantage of the working-class background he inherited from the Mao era. A figure working closely with government officials, Jia has made considerable profits by embracing state-sponsored tourism and urban redevelopment, but at the end of the day his investment in the state projects has also contributed to the disintegration of his neighborhood. Jia is deeply nostalgic about memories in Dashalar so much so that he exhibits his photos of old Beijing in his restaurant, but at the same time he also consciously keeps a distance from other residents in Dashalar. By reading the stories of Jia Yong and Zhang Huiming, we come to see an ambivalent mapping of subaltern urban life entangled with state and market powers.

These nuanced discussions about Dashalar are clearly based on Evans's long-term engagement with the neighborhood, from which we come to see the ethics of conducting oral history and cultivating relationship as a core concern of this book. As a project that dialogues with Gail Hershatter's oral history study *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, this book shares similar methodological concerns on how to listen to stories of silence and tell a "good enough story" of gendered memory.[5] Evans is aware of her limit of recovering local history and deciphering local contexts, as well as circumstances in which her interlocutors kept information from her. Trust and knowledge may be developed only through time, and even by that point the relationship between the oral historian and her interlocutor is a complex one transgressing the borders of friendship and calculations. The most illustrative example is Evans's friendship with Hua Meiling: over years, Meiling had become an interlocutor who would confide intimately in Evans, but even so, there could still be an awkward moment when Meiling wanted to borrow money from Evans. This fuzzy boundary of relationship reminds me of a relation-oriented approach advocated by the Chinese documentary maker Zhou Hao, who stresses that the moment a storyteller enters a live scene is also the moment in which the storyteller starts to participate in the interlocutor's life. Over time, each project is essentially a process of relation-making co-created

with the interlocutor.[6] Similarly, Evans acknowledges the role of her interlocutors in co-shaping this book project. Perhaps one of the most moving features about this book is a strong ethical commitment Evans inherited from her late friend Zhao Tielin, a local photographer who first started the project of documenting Dashalar and introduced Evans to the neighborhood. Seen through this light, this project is always a product grown out of relations and dedicated to relations.

The breadth and complexity of this monograph as well as its ethical considerations has led me to a few questions. Thanks to the dialogic space offered by *The PRC History Review*, I would love to take this opportunity to ask these questions and learn more from Evans.

My first question is on Evans's methodological choice of engaging with a single neighborhood in Beijing. In the past two decades, we have seen a growing body of academic texts and cultural products taking a similar approach to detail the bottom-up experience of urban transformation in China. Quick examples include Jie Li's family memoir *Shanghai Homes* on Shanghai alleyways, Jia Zhangke's films on Fenyang, and Liang Hong's nonfiction on the changes of her hometown Liang Village as the other side of urbanization.[7] Thinking across these diverse projects, I am wondering if this form of regional writing from below may lead to a new kind of collective consciousness and shift our focus from the *local* to the *translocal*. To what extent is the story of Dashalar a distinctly Beijing story and to what extent does it speak to general conditions across China and/or the world? Does the fact that Dashalar is located in the capital and its center offer something unique from subaltern urban stories from elsewhere?

My next question, attending to both the analytical framework of this study and shifting realities on the ground, is on the uneven and unstable statuses of the subaltern in Chinese contexts. In the book, Evans has introduced a wide array of subaltern positions ranging from those whose futures have been structurally rejected to others like Jia Yong who have taken advantage of the system and joined the club of a new urban middle class. Although the latter seems like an exception in the book, its anomaly draws my attention here. This is not only because the story of individual material success is what has enchanted post-Mao China, but also because the structural shift of material conditions has become a reality for a vast population in China. Figures like Jia Yong pose some most interesting yet difficult questions to the classical paradigm of subaltern studies from South Asia, as they are not in a fixed position of subordination, nor are they innocent in the nexus of state and market powers. Meanwhile, it is also true that these figures still bear fresh memories of poverty and emplacement as their transition to the middle-class is only a recent history. Then, my question is: does the shifting position of figures like Jia Yong turn themselves against the very root they come from? Could their existence offer some insights to complicate our understanding of the subaltern in China and set new grounds for rewriting subaltern theories?

The fact that Jia Yong in the book is also a photographer avidly documenting his neighborhood raises a related question about whether the subaltern can represent themselves. As Gayatri Spivak famously asks, can the subaltern speak?[8] Jia Yong's well-off position seems to suggest that cultural capital is associated with economic and class advantage. However, I cannot help thinking of some storytellers in my own research who have maintained their marginalized status, such as migrant workers writing on the outskirts of Beijing and underground rappers and folk singers from poor neighborhoods. Peasants and delivery workers on Douyin and Kuaishou also suggest a trend of subaltern populations displaying their own lives on digital media. With these cases in mind, I am curious to learn from Evans how she might interpret this new phenomenon in China today. Does she see a possibility of people reclaiming their subaltern origins and representing themselves? When cultural products transgress the boundaries of social class and reach a broader audience, what happens to the subaltern status of their creators? Would they be necessarily assimilated into the apparatus of the state, market, and/or other institutional forces?

In lieu of conclusion, I would love to ask a final question about how we as readers may inherit the memories of Dashalar. As I happened to be on my fieldwork in Beijing when I read this book, I could relate to many critical observations made by Evans such as the longstanding impact of the 2008 Olympics and the 2017 mass evictions on the city and its people. Not long after reading this book, I was inspired to take a trip to Dashalar as well as to the site of a tenement fire that took place in November 2017 and set out the government campaign of evicting migrant laborers. While Dashalar, as Evans describes, has been developed into a commercial site for tourists, the area near the tenement fire has been transformed, silently, into a crop field. In both places, subaltern memories are fragile traces on the verge of disappearance, as the urban space gets rewritten rapidly by capital and state policies. Then, for readers who do not have the same knowledge as Evans, how can we see Dashalar when we come back to the neighborhood? What do we do with the erased traces? Can we still see Beijing, from below?

[1] For relevant studies on the modern and contemporary period, see Julie Chu, "When infrastructures attack: The workings of disrepair in China," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 2 (2014): 351-367; Jie Li, *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014); Michael Meyer, *The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed* (New York: Walker, 2008); Qin Shao, *Shanghai Gone: Domicide and Defiance in a Chinese Megacity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). For earlier studies of the urban poor in Republican China, see Janet Chen, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1953* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012); Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday*

Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[2] For more discussions on the impact of the 2008 Olympics on Beijing's urban and cultural life, see Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2010) and Joshua Neves, *Underglobalization: Beijing's Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2020).

[3] Urban demolition and transformation in China has become a recurrent theme archived by filmmakers such as Cong Feng, Jia Zhangke, Li Yifan, Wang Bing and Zhou Hao. An example, discussed in the book, is Ou Ning's *Meishi jie* (Meishi street), a 2006 documentary that exposes state-local contentions over demolitions in Dashalar.

[4] Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian), trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia UP, 1964).

[5] Gail Hershatter, *Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3.

[6] Zhou Hao, post-screening Q&A at the Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival, October 25, 2019. See also Hanguang, "Zhou Hao: pai pianzi yongyuan dou shi rulvbobing de ganjue" (Zhou Hao: filmmaking is always like walking on eggshells), *Aotujing DOC*, October 26, 2019, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/j8JS-vViXKxoT5IE_1-lCg.

[7] Liang Hong, *China in One Village*, trans. Emily Goedde (London & New York: Verso, 2021).

[8] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-316.

Response

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To begin with, I feel both honored and privileged that Yidi Wu, book review editor of PRC History, decided to commission a review of my *Beijing from Below*, and to have been given the opportunity to respond to Shiqi Lin's thoughtful and insightful comments and questions.[1] I do not have the space here to address all of the topics she raises, but below I attempt to weave some of them into a very partial and uneven response to her queries. But not in the order she asks them.

First, subalternity. This is an aspect of the book about which I have thought a lot since it was published. Due to considerations of length when I was writing the final draft of the manuscript, my discussion of this issue in the book is perhaps not as comprehensive as it could have been. So I am grateful for this opportunity to reflect on it a bit more.

In using the term subaltern in *Beijing from Below* I argue that the subaltern is always constitutive of history, "even if in modes of expression—traces—that are neither apparent in dominant historiographical narratives nor totally accessible to the researcher." (p.6) In contrast with famous argument that there is no position of enunciation from which the subaltern can speak, I argue that any such position is unstable, transitory. It also necessarily is caught up in the contradictions and slippages within the hegemonic ideology. Gyan Prakash was particularly helpful in my thinking here. In his words, "subalternity erupts within the system of dominance, but only as an intimation, as a trace of that which eludes the dominant discourse[….]This means that the subaltern poses counterhegemonic possibilities not as inviolable otherness from the outside but from within the functioning of power, forcing contradictions and dislocations in the dominant discourse." [2] Such acknowledgment that the subaltern was both internal to and external to the dominant system further permitted the emergence of thinking subaltern histories as "fragmentary, disconnected, incomplete, [and that] subaltern consciousness was split within itself, [and] was constituted by elements drawn from the experiences of both dominant and subordinate classes."[3]

My conceptualization of the term in the book emerged not from an already formulated theoretical position, but in response to the ethnographic evidence I encountered during my research, in the form of various individuals whose socio-economic status in the commodified political economy of the post-millennial years did not correspond with any clear definition of the "laboring people" of the working class, even through what Lin Chun calls the lens of the "negative signifiers" that had long since replaced the former acclamation of the working class as masters of the revolution.[4] Nor did their memories of life during the Mao era correspond with the then dominant characterization of the working class as the leading class of China's social and political transformation. Memory is always elusive, and had I had the opportunity to talk with my Dashalar acquaintances during the Mao era, they doubtless would have spoken in different terms. However, neither their accounts of their education and employment during those years, nor the local archival record, contradicted the main outline of their narratives of life during the Mao era as at the margins of the socio-political and organisational disciplines of the working class. Many local residents worked in small-scale "factories"—better thought of as makeshift workshops—in the neighborhood, or like Old Mrs. Gao did piecework in the interiors of their cramped homes. Analysed alongside the local archival record of such conditions, none of those I spent time with were employed in the socio-spatial, political and organisational environment of the "work unit" (*gongzuo danwei*). [5] In sociological terms, they are commonly glossed in Chinese academia and mainstream media as the "*shehui zui diceng de jieceng*" (the lowest stratum of society) of Beijing residents. Li Fuying and his wife—the only migrant family I got to know well—would fall under the even more disdained category of the abusively described *diduan* (low end) migrant population, vast numbers of whom were forced out of the capital in an official crackdown on unsafe housing in November 2017. [6] Both these terms, however, whether in Chinese or the English equivalent of "underclass", are inscribed with a kind of moralistic and discriminatory hierarchy. In Chinese, this is shored up by the popular invocation of the discourse of "*suzhi*" (quality).[7] That this is now an aspect of hegemonic discourse concerning education and cultural standards was apparent in its occasional appearance as a self-descriptor in the narratives of my interlocutors. However, neither the minutiae of translation nor the marginalized character of my acquaintances' lives during the years that I visited them could answer my key question: what theoretical concept could I draw on to refer to the lived experiences of individuals who found themselves excluded from the advantages of being associated with the work unit-based working class during the Mao era?

I was already familiar with the notion of the subaltern, initially through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's classic—"Can the Subaltern Speak" which I had taught to Masters students of Critical Cultural Studies.[8] I also knew that the concept had travelled quite considerably from its early borrowings from Gramsci to draw attention to the political and relational dimensions of class, in postcolonial India to the very different post-colonial situation in Latin America. However, Dashalar afforded a historical and political context that was utterly distinct from both. One notable difference was that even though the people of Dashalar seemed to have forgotten the terms of Mao-era discourse to which they must once have been exposed, this was not a society that had never been exposed to class (or universalist) discourses. Even so, I thought that the concept offered a possible route to explore as a category of analysis for

the positioning of my acquaintances in Beijing's post-millennial market economy. In itself, this was not new. Various scholars had already used the term with reference to China: Hershatter, as a figure of pre-revolutionary history,[9] Anagnost to the early stages of land reform,[10] and Rofel to the early years of the post-Mao reform era.[11] Wanning Sun further elaborated the category to refer to the millions of disenfranchized migrant laborers whose blood, sweat, tears and hopes shaped the untold story of the construction of the "China Dream." [12] Yet this did not resolve my query: namely, the possible extension of the concept to explore the experience of relations of subjugation to the new socialist state of individuals (and their families) who for diverse reasons, and by no means uniformly as a consequence of government policy, found themselves excluded from the ranks of the institutionalized working class between the early 1950s and the late 1970s.

The issue is theoretically and politically complicated by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) claims to represent the interests of the working class, the peasantry, and all oppressed peoples. The industrial working class in Beijing in 1949 was tiny, and while the CCP concentrated on industrial workers, it didn't ignore the fact that the vast majority of workers, including the likes of Old Mrs. Gao, were employed in non-factory settings. The party generically defined them as "workers" (though not as "industrial workers" (*chanye gongren*)) and, organizationally, through the 1950s, sought to implant its presence in their ranks through neighborhood committees, cooperatives, night schools, and so on. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the extent to which the CCP's claims can be substantiated, and in any case, I have no interest in discussing Chinese socialism under Mao as a binary choice of either *for* or *against* it. But for now, suffice to say that vast numbers of the urban working class and the peasantry, women as well as men, celebrated and benefitted from the social, economic, political and cultural changes formally ushered in with the establishment of the PRC in 1949. [13] Nevertheless, ethnographically speaking, the CCP's status as acknowledged representative of China's pre-liberation subalterns did not entirely remove the latter from experiences of marginalization—of subaltern status. The legacy of Old Mrs. Gao's experience as the youngest illiterate daughter of a destitute urban woman, initially sold into domestic servitude when she was only five years old, followed her into the 1950s. Her lack of education and domestic responsibilities as mother of infant children effectively barred her from becoming a formal member of the urban working class. Any paid work she had was either undertaken under the auspices of the local neighborhood committee —such as the gruesome task of unpicking the fabric of dead soldiers uniforms to repurpose for further use — or in the inner room of the *dazayuan* where she lived, where alongside her neighborhood "sisters" she folded paper into pages of what were to become copies of the "Little Red Book."[14] "What else could someone like me do?" she asked. Her husband, whom I never met, was employed as a vegetable vendor, selling vegetables at the state-run vegetable depot in Dashalar. Their very basic income was not enough to stave off hunger during the famine years (1959-1962). The couple were never beneficiaries of the "iron rice bowl," (*tie fanwan*), used metaphorically to refer to access to life-long employment and fixed wages in the urban work units, regardless of how much (or how little) the individual worked. Later on in life, Old Mrs. Gao regretted not having worked in a work unit, not because she longed for class recognition but for the access to a pension it would have given her. In her own terms, her illiteracy, and her husband's failure to milk the system for material gain (she complained that he used to undersell his goods by weighing out too much for the customer) condemned her to a material existence of scarcity and precarity. She was acknowledged by her neighbors for her resilience in keeping her family going, but she did not regard herself as a "worker" (*gongren*). Her descriptions of her past life did not go far beyond what I think of and discuss in the book as her rehearsal of a few dominant themes that she would repeat when asked to, possibly in line with the political expectations of "speak bitterness." Nevertheless, while accepting the forgettings of memory, neither her's, her children's nor Zhao Tielin's accounts of her life during the Mao era gave any evidence of having lived a life as a proud member of the urban working class, masters of the revolution.

One of the prominent themes discussed in the Subaltern Studies Group concerned the relationship between autonomy, subjectivity and agency. I initially felt a certain unease with Spivak's idea of the "autonomy" of the subaltern realm. My research substantiated what I thought of as a more relational view that allowed for conceptualizing a more fluid relationship between the subaltern, the state and elite politics, in which subaltern subjectivity—and the possibilities of agency—were defined both within and outside hegemonic discourse. It may be useful to think of Old Mrs. Gao's story through this lens. Both in her own self-identification and that imposed on her by official discourse, she was a dependent "housewife" (*jiashu*) doing her best to sustain her family through times of terrible scarcity. However, to add to Shiqi Lin's comment, she articulated a very specific form of agency, as a determined and long-suffering wife and mother whose moral stature was both recognized by her neighbors, and embedded in her own sense of self. Downtrodden and barred from access to institutional forms of recognition, she could claim virtue in having withstood all odds to keep her family going. Maoist politics operated in a highly moralized way, highlighting tropes of self-sacrifice for the collective, but the ability to keep going in the face of adversity– and to be admired by one's neighbors for so doing –demonstrates another moral code at work. The Party would talk in terms of struggle, but always with some enemy in mind. It didn't provide a language for valorizing the ability to survive against poverty and precarity.

Zhao Yong —head (*jiazhang*)of the poorest Beijing family I knew in the neighborhood—owed what I argue was his "subaltern" status during the Mao era to the legacy of class categorization. Zhao Yong's entire life was colored by his inheritance of the label of "small landlord" (*xiao dizhu*) imposed on his parents early on in the People's Republic. It is impossible to know from his account alone how much he and his siblings suffered from social ostracization due to his parents' political status. What we do know is that neither his family's poverty not the fact that formally speaking they were not "class enemies", they had to endure severe physical

violence by the Red Guards. This is a complex issue to argue. According to the class analysis of the time, the "people" (*renmin*—the proletariat, the peasantry, the national bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie (teachers and professionals) —collectively exercised a dictatorship over those social categories/classes whose interests ran counter to the revolution.[15] Even though they were far from wealthy and had not, as far as I understand, employed labor outside their immediate kin networks, Zhao Yong's parents' entrepreneurial activities before 1949 earned them the label of "small landlord," excluding them from the ranks of the revolutionary masses, denying them dependable employment and condemning them to lives of poverty in subsequent years. While their class denomination excluded them from access to the working class, their poverty and its influence on their son, Zhao Yong, were the effects of a conscious political decision to relegate this family to the most disdained echelons of urban society.

These two examples in themselves are enough to demonstrate how, if we are to use the term historically with reference to those subjected to the political structures and practices of the fledgling PRC, subalternity was a differentiated and gendered stratum. The fragmented social existence and individualized income generating activities of Old Mrs. Gao and Zhao Yong, for example, effectively barred them from the possibility of collective consciousness. Furthermore, Zhao Yong's experience also demands an analytical differentiation between and within the social groups excluded from the democratic bloc of the "people" (*renmin*) and those who were categorized as "counter-revolutionary" —whose landlord or entrepreneurial status was associated either with wealth or with social and political connections and that could benefit their children despite inheriting their negative class background. As "small landlords" Zhao Yong's parents did not share the same class background as a large-scale landlord or entrepreneur. The combination of Zhao Yong's family poverty and his inherited political status permanently excluded him from access to any kind of social or political recognition, including a proper education. His status as a subaltern of the system then followed him into the post-Mao reform era. Through years of short-term jobs and effectively denied access to social recognition by his neighbors, his situation was only marginally more secure than migrants such as Li Fuying and his wife.

Of the individuals I introduce in my book, Li Fuying and his wife most clearly correspond with Wanning Sun's characterization of migrant laborers as China's current subalterns. Prior to market reform they were poor peasants, but structurally were included within the formal system of accounting under the commune system. As they moved away from their village in northern Shaanxi, their post-commune experiences of violent exclusion from access to institutions of steady employment, welfare and financial backup, and the brutal violence they experienced during their years in Beijing dates their descendancy into subaltern precarity within the social and temporal moment of the post-Mao reforms.

Shiqi Lin asks whether the shifting position of a figure such as Jia Yong turned him against the social roots he came from? Does his story offer other insights that complicate an understanding of the subaltern in China? In responding to this it is important to re-ground the analysis in relevant familial and class contexts. Jia Yong's parents were employed as factory workers through the sixties and the seventies and enjoyed a basic economic stability via the "iron rice bowl" system as established members of the work unit-based working class. Even though Jia Yong's own development was far from conventional, his parents' income granted him the opportunity to experiment with entrepreneurial activities and attend a sports college where he met his wife. Thereafter, into the post-Mao reform era, he acquired a taste for and the status of a small entrepreneur and was able to benefit from the social and cultural capital his associations with photographers, journalists and local officials offered. So while Jia Yong's family was far from wealthy when he was growing up, they could benefit from a socio-economic and political stability to which subalterns such as Old Mrs. Gao and Zhao Yong did not have access. This is a distinction I didn't make in the book.

Nor did I make it with reference to Zhang Huiming and her husband. Zhang Huiming's social and educational background gave her access to cultural pursuits such as art appreciation, and this gave her the opportunity to meet her future husband. Huiming worked in a small local factory and the Old Professor in the craft branch of the famous Nei Lian Sheng shoe store. They thus had access to dependable, if very basic, incomes. The couple were also able to benefit materially from the state's allocation of welfare payments to Huiming on the grounds of her disability, and from the Old Professor's employment as a licensed pedicab driver. The Old Professor and his wife could turn their cultural capital into material advantage.

I do not make any claims that these stories are representative of any class or sociological reality. However they do trouble the conceptualization of class under both socialism and capitalism, and I suggest offer some preliminary leads into rethinking how a theoretical category—subalternity—that began in the context of the historiography of postcolonial India may be extended to apply to conditions of subjugation both within socialist systems elsewhere and under the extractive practices of global capitalism.

Then there is Shiqi Lin's question concerning the "possibility of people reclaiming their subaltern origins and representing themselves?" This prompts an interrogation of what we understand by "representing themselves." One response concerns the conditions under which subaltern communities can become self-consciously subversive of or resistant to the hegemonic ideology. Why, for example, could other potentially subaltern populations in adjacent neighborhoods of central Beijing stage protests against demolition of their houses by the authorities, yet not in Dashalar? The fragmented character of Dashalar residents' everyday lives, the relentless physical and spatial pressure of for example, having to hassle for work and access to the public showers, radically constrained the social character of their lives. Their poor levels of education and limited writing skills limited their capacity to access print or analogue media. They also made very limited use of digital practices (Kuaishou didn't really get going until the 2010s), to connect with their peers. I suspect that this was partly an effect

of the costs of as well as the lack of familiarity with online connectivity. If used at all, cell phones were a convenient means of communication to confirm meetings and keep in touch with family members. Here readers have to bear in mind that my interlocutors were mostly aged fifty and above. The only person I knew who spent much time online was Meiling's daughter for whom online dating and fashions invited her to imagine liberation from, *not* reclamation of her subaltern status. Socially, politically and digitally, my acquaintances' lives offered few spaces or possibilities for asserting ownership of their subaltern status in the service of collective counter-hegemonic solidarity. In the absence of collective forms of self-representation, their assertion of agency thus took individuated and material forms, as I note below.

Some scholars, including Junxi Qian and Eric Florence have argued that implicitly subaltern representation, in the form or poetry and museum exhibitions, can become possible, particularly with NGO involvement. [16] Yet the combination of Dashalar's poor housing stock alongside the heritage commodification of "old Beijing" restricted the attention of NGOs to no more than a few local buildings of architectural and historical interest. The local residents I knew were uniformly cynical about the possible motivations of any NGO or legal personnel who might have shown interest in their situations. Jia Yong's black and white photographs archived long years of neighborhood subaltern existence, but by the time my book was published these had little to distinguish them from the nostalgic heritage reinvention of "old Beijing." The resentment shown by some towards Jia Yong doubtless masked considerable envy of him. Many indicated a vacillation between a kind of fatalistic cynicism towards and complicity with the state. While envy and vacillation may well have contained the seeds of a "possible assimilation into the apparatus of state," as Shiqi Lin put it, my research did not probe these responses enough to be able to give a fuller response to her question. In any event, we know that the competition for funding and requirements of official registration on the part of local NGOs, would complicate any intention to draw on NGO involvement to reclaim "subaltern origins and self-representation."

This issue of representation brings me to my methodology and narrative structure. It took me some time to come up with what I thought was a structure and narrative form up to the task of conveying something of the everyday granularity of how my subjects represented themselves. The political sensitivity of the topic during the years of my research determined my decision not to include photographs of my subjects, even though some of them were keen for me to do so. Instead, I chose to focus on images of spaces and material objects, on what Erik Mueggler elsewhere has qualified as "the transient obduracy of intimate objects [as] the ground out of which [these] life histories eventually emerge.[17] Such reference to the intimacy of objects offers readers the opportunity to imagine both how local Dashalar residents' lives were constituted materially and affectively through these spaces and objects, and how these spaces and objects shaped their lives. In conditions of extreme scarcity, such spaces and objects were the material form through which my acquaintances could "represent" themselves, if you will, in the intimate interiors of their everyday lives. As Shiqi Lin sensitively comments, the intimacy of "materiality and emplacement" invites the reader to "imagine the sensorial experience of living in Dashalar." But there is a further important point about this intimacy, for some, notably Li Fuying, Zhao Yong and Meiling, these crowded interiors of spatial, material and affective intimacy, offered the possibility of sharing representations of self that they could not have shared in public spaces. Self-representation in this sense was thus as inseparable from an "historically contingent reading of agency out of material precarity" as it was from the ethics of recognition. Much more than a local or national problem, the question at stake is a larger issue concerning our access to subalterns' experience as the affective embodiment of disposable lives in the extractive system of global neoliberal capitalism.

Li's and Zhang's experience of the city then obliges the reader to confront not only "how the peripheral migrant populations are making do," but also "what accounts for the justice of urban governance." The couple's experience of official rhetoric to uphold the rule of law was not of the legal system as an instrument of justice but of it as an arm of the corrupt abuse of power. Beyond this, and without having given analytical attention to the issue of just urban governance in my research, I can only hazard a few comments in response to Shiqi Lin's question. Just urban governance for Li and Zhang amounted to a basic attitude of respect for their humanity and dignity protected from and against the corrupt practices of venal local officials. Zhao Yong articulated a similar sentiment when, outraged at being arrested by a local policeman for a minor traffic infringement, he loudly complained to me that his human rights were being abused.

My stories of life in Dashalar of course point to singular experiences due in part to the unique spatial, social and historical particularities of the neighborhood. They also point to translocal experiences of scarcity and precarity experienced by the disenfranchised and dispossessed the world over. With reference to ideas about just urban governance they further speak to the globalized as well as localized workings of institutionalised corruption by the coercive organs of state power and big business. Lest anyone mistake this comment for specific reference to the global south, just bear in mind the UK and EU's failure to respect the humanity and dignity of the vast numbers of homeless amongst their own populations or their failure to distribute the Covid vaccine to populations unable to afford it.

Finally, temporality. Shiqi Lin notes my use of tense and how tense denotes a shifting sense of temporalities. Her suggestion that a sense of the future anterior was threaded through my entire narrative is telling. In a sense, and though I didn't articulate it in these terms in the book, the entire project, covering the many years of my research in Dashalar, was framed by both the uncertainty and the inevitability of a future which for some was so catastrophic that it could not be thought—recall Young Gao's "we can't think about the future; all we can do is get through today." Yet there is more to say about temporality that has further bearings on my subalterns' relationship to the state. One of the points I make in the book

refers to the almost total absence in my interlocutors' narratives of direct references to the state through the temporalities of Hershatter's "campaign time." Yet there was a palpable if unspoken awareness, conveyed by their references to the material scarcity and precarity of their lives, that their conditions of existence had been and continued to be framed by the state, whether socialist or market driven. What analytically might appear as a contradiction between narrative absence and presence of state could be articulated through reference to Prakash's argument noted above regarding the simultaneous interiority and externality of the state in subaltern lives.

In ending, I wish to acknowledge that I have only scratched the surface of key discussions concerning those who structurally and experientially were denied access to spaces of recognition in both the socialist and the post-socialist state-market/capitalist eras of the PRC. This discussion needs to be pushed much further both with reference to other localities in China and to a broader transnational context. And while I would welcome others' intervention in a broader debate, it does seem to me that the notion of the subaltern can be productively, if cautiously, used to apply to histories and experiences radically different to those of postcolonial India, including individuals such as those I introduce in my book who for different reasons during the Mao era found themselves excluded by lack of social and cultural capital, as well as by political characterization from access to the ranks of the urban working class. I am just glad that I could conduct my research at the time I did and so could produce a book that preserves some traces of a subaltern existence in a neighborhood that has been obliterated by the glossy monuments to global capitalism.

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[1] I wish to thank Carwyn Morris for hosting a probing online discussion about the subaltern in my book, and Rebecca Karl for her thought provoking comments. I also thank Margaret Hillenbrand, Stephen Smith, and Sanjay Seth for commenting on earlier versions of this response.

[2] Prakash, Gyan. "The impossibility of subaltern history." *Subaltern Studies*, 1(2000): 268.

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[4] Lin, Chun, "Mass Line", in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2019), 125.

[5] Lin, Kevin, "Work Unit" in *ibid*., 331-334

[6] "The Beijing Migrants Crackdown," A ChinaFile Conversation, November 30, 2017.

[7] Tomba, Luigi "Of Quality, Harmony, and Community: Civilization and the Middle Class in Urban China", *positions* (2009) 17 (3): 591–616.

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[11] Rofel, Lisa. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism*. (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1999).

[12] Wanning Sun, *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media and Cultural Practices* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014)

[13] For a volume that takes the Maoist legacy seriously as a revolutionary project, see op.cit. *Afterlives of Chinese Communism* (2019).

[14] Salaff, Janet Weitzner. "Urban Communities in the wake of the Cultural Revolution." In *The City in Communist China*. Edited by John Wilson Lewis. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971), 289-323. Salaff was one of the first to identify the gendered implications of the low status of the kinds of employment organized by local neighborhood committees.

[15] Mao Zedong, "On the People's Democratic Dictatorshop," (June 30, 1949) in *Mao Tse-tung Selected Works*, Vol. IV, Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 1977.

[16] Qian, Junxi & Eric Florence, "Migrant worker museums in China: public cultures of migrant labour in state and grassroots initiatives", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, (2020) https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1739373

[17] Mueggler, Erik, "Life in Old Beijing" in a book symposium on Beijing from Below in *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* (forthcoming 2022)