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Urban 'Clutter': Stairway Landings of Shanghai

Dada Docot

Abstract

This piece presents a photographic documentation of the staircase landings of a high-rise apartment building in Shanghai in which I have been residing since August 2017. On these stairway landings rest various "stuff" that appear to be merely, "mess" or "clutter." Amid the rush of daily life in Shanghai, I pause to think through this series of photographs. The photographs and accompanying statement reflect on the mundane objects left on the staircase landings which do not map too neatly within the urban order laid out in rapidly rising Shanghai. This piece seeks to open conversations into what could be a deeper understanding of the messiness of urban life in post-Mao China – an aesthetic or a mode of life that is constantly being revised, organized, fixed, and upgraded.

Arrival

I arrived in Shanghai in August 2017, at a time when this “glamour city” was promising to dazzle visitors with its bright lights, innovations in technology and urban design, and hybrid cultural offerings (Information Office of Shanghai Municipality 2018). I was joining the city’s expanding list of “foreign experts,” for a short-term fellowship based in New York University-Shanghai (NYUSH), the first Sino-American university founded in 2012 with the aim to bring liberal and global education to China. I carefully weighed my opportunity for expanding my international teaching portfolio with my looming anxiety of working in a country amid its tense political relations with my own – the Philippines – especially in relation to the contested Scarborough Shoal, a resource-rich and strategic reef being claimed by China, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan. China continues to strengthen its defense and surveillance infrastructure in the area, consequently projecting its “power in Asia’s most disputed waters” (Petty 2017). This is despite the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague that invalidated China’s claims on the disputed territories (Poling et al.). Conscious of these ongoing tensions, I packed my bags and headed to Shanghai, in effect joining the mass of over 10 million overseas Filipino workers spread globally, with mainland China as relatively a new destination for those with teaching qualifications.

Arriving in Shanghai, I chose to live in a high-rise residential building within walking distance of the university, keen to avoid the rush hour on the metro. Through my residence in Shanghai, I came to observe the city as continually being revised, organized, fixed, and upgraded. In this essay, I am interested in reflecting on the “stuff” that does not map too neatly within the order imposed on the streets of Shanghai. I think through my series of photographs that document the “mess” on the 22 staircase landings in my apartment building, in which I have been residing for a little over a year now. I heed Daniel Miller’s warnings about the attention given to material culture as tending to invite a critique of fetishism, as reflected in *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (Miller 2-21). Admittedly, this appeared “strange” to me, especially in comparison to the North American practice of managing household “stuff” through commercial self-storage that was more visible to me via Western media (Bell and Bell 63-84). I have also formerly resided in apartment buildings in the United States, Canada, Bulgaria, Hong Kong, Japan, Philippines, but have not seen a similar use of common spaces (Figure 1-3).

Below, I open conversations for understanding a mode of urban life in which, city residents, I argue, resist being wholly contained within regimes of capital-driven order and development, through their assertions of maintaining an aesthetic of disorder. I suggest that the “clutter” left on spaces such as staircase landings in Shanghai’s high-rise residential apartments, are political sites for

symbolic protests in this case, against the fast-tracked development of megacities that other scholars have already argued as a violent act (Shao 16-31; Tadiar 143-181), and against the disciplining of its residents.



Fig. 1. The antique leather suitcase on the 22nd floor landing propels me to think about the travel itineraries of the building's residents. Photo credit: Dada Docot.



Fig. 2. High-rise buildings in the same residential complexes in China often share the same design. Photo credit: Dada Docot.



Fig. 3. The landing on the 16th floor looks busier than the others with its crowd of boxes, shelf, mops, and others. Photo credit: Dada Docot.

Living in a Vertical City

China has undergone massive reforms since December 1978, after Deng Xiaoping announced a reordering of the country's economy. Opening doors to global business, China's rural and urban economies transformed quickly as global capital rapidly flowed into the latter, pulling in migrant labor into the cities, and creating "rural voids" in the agricultural vastlands (Driessen 61-84). Shanghai, the country's business capital, came to be one of the areas that were profoundly transformed, becoming one of the world's densest cities, with a population of over 25 million (World Population Review 2018). Shanghai has become a vertical city that now hosts three supertall skyscrapers that are often the centerpiece of visual renditions of its skyline. As Peter Gaubatz writes, the "vertical dimension" (Gaubatz 1511) of Shanghai precisely has become the city's distinct trait (these changes link with Shanghai's historical encounter with Western trade and commerce in 1842, following the Treaty of Nanking). Now headquartered in these skyscrapers are some of China's top-grossing businesses as well as a multitude of foreign companies.

My apartment is only three kilometers from the famed Lujiazui, the city's bustling business district. Living in Shanghai, I learned that the area in which I had decided to live, called the Pudong District and located on the eastern side of the Huangpu River, is a government-designated development zone that continues to expand to accommodate high-rise residential complexes and commercial buildings as Lujiazui and other emerging commercial and industrial hubs in Shanghai become even more congested. More precisely, I live in one of the "elevator buildings" (Gaubatz 1510) in Pudong. By the beginning of the 90s, seven percent of residential buildings in Shanghai were taller than 10 stories (Statistical Bureau of Shanghai, 1993, p. 383, qtd. in Gaubatz 1511). The building

in which I reside was constructed in the early 90s and is among the taller apartment buildings in the area.

In October 2017, one of my apartment building's two elevators was getting replaced, while the other one was very busy shuffling up and down not only residents but also construction materials for the various apartment units undergoing renewal and for the other elevator. Occasionally, the residents had to take the stairs to avoid the long queue for the sole functioning elevator. I came to know of the "mess" on each landing during this time. Descending on the stairs, I was struck by some of the elements on the stairway landings that distinguish one from another. Set on some of the landings are traces of the activities of their residents (Figure 4) while some landings appear to have been repurposed as extensions of the residents' living spaces (Figures 5 and 6).



Fig. 4. Residents on the 12th floor might have had an electrical appliance repaired. Photo credit: Dada Docot.



Fig. 5. The landing on the 18th floor accommodates clothes and blankets hung out to dry. Photo credit: Dada Docot.



Fig. 6. The 11th floor landing has been converted into a lounge, complete with thriving potted plants. Photo credit: Dada Docot.

What other sides of the story could be explored, apart from the rather obvious assessment that these “not completely left-behind” objects found on the staircase landings of both my apartment building and of those in which my peers reside, serve as testimonies to the fact that “property management in China is a new concept to both residents and management staff” (Lim and Han 59). What else is there about the “mess,” apart from the city government’s slowness, if not reluctance, to tackle this fire-hazard “excess”? If “mess” is material culture, then we could learn from Daniel Miller who suggests that a challenge in studying material culture is that the subject “is almost always

mute...” (Miller 12). Martin F. Manalansan IV writes that attending to “mess” can serve as “a route for funk up and mobilizing new understandings of stories, values, objects, and space/time arrangements” (Manalansan IV 99). Following Manalansan who sees “mess” as an intimate archive that relates to the broader social and political world, these objects have led me to reflect on some of the mundane objects around me, which I would have otherwise easily dismissed as not making sense.

Promises/Casualties of Development

The speed of urban development of Shanghai links with the high turnover of consumption practices of its residents, which in turn, I argue, link with the stockpiling of objects on the staircase landings of residential apartments – worn-out Jordans on the 6th floor (Figure 7), rusty bikes, chipped furniture, mattresses, and others. I witness the speed of consumption in Shanghai through the enormous volume of packages delivered to my apartment building every day. In his book *Global Shanghai, 1850-2010: A History in Fragments*, Historian of China Jeffrey Wasserstrom recounts that

as late as 1986, Shanghai did not yet have many of the things associated with its current largely privatized and re-globalized incarnation...It had no stock market, no karaoke bars, no internet cafés, no KFC franchises,...no new-style gated communities,...no luxury apartment buildings or car dealerships...It had no new skyscrapers shooting up toward the heavens, public spaces dominated by advertisements for products rather than for political campaigns, or glossy magazines telling those with upscale aspirations how to decorate their homes and what to wear (Wasserstrom 117).

Clearly, public spaces were not yet dominated by skyscrapers and billboards that are certainly crafting Shanghainese aspirations of the urban ways of living, and consequently, of consumption practices that initiate people into urbanites.

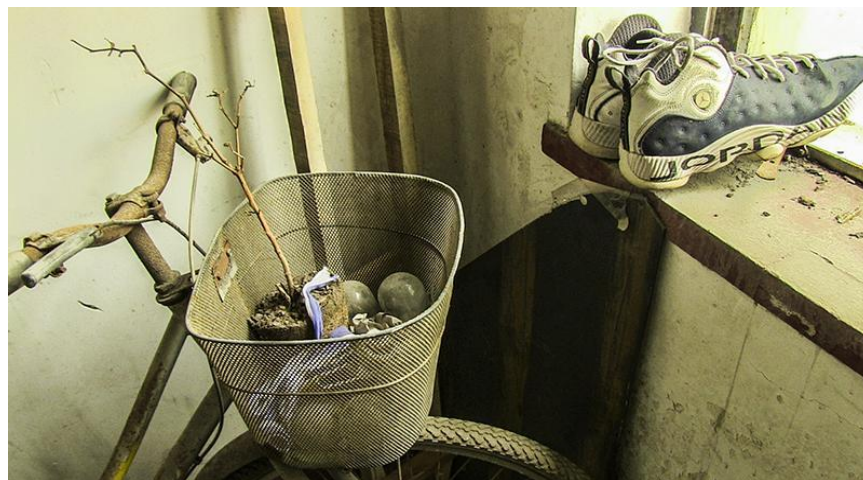


Fig. 7. A pair of Jordans look out of the window, and a wilted plant decomposes on the bike basket on the 6th floor. Photo credit: Dada Docot.

A pile of uncollected delivery packages sits in the corner of my apartment building's lobby, waiting to be picked up by their online buyers. Some of the packages have been there for weeks, and like the objects on the staircase landings, steadily gathering dust. In their research on solid waste utilization in the cities, Boya Zhou, Chunxia Sun, and Hongtao Yi (Zhou et al. 15) argue that at the background of solid waste production is the shift from money-saving to high buying habits "especially among young people in big cities." In other countries, there is a strong correlation between the population's levels of college education and increased awareness in managing excess and waste, but Zhou et al.'s research reveals a "weak positive correlation" between the two variables in urban China. They argue that increased rates of college enrolment do not appear to be a significant variable in environmental awareness in the urban areas, as the efforts to promote sustainability practices would need to consider the "unexpected new composition of solid waste" from online shopping and takeaway goods that have become a trend in Chinese cities in the last five years. (Zhou et al. 15)

However, I suggest that to summarily dismiss the objects on the staircase landings as merely a collection of clutter supplused by the city residents' catching up with global consumer trends, would elide conversations about how objects "matter." If Shanghai residents tire of their purchased material goods more quickly than ever before, why do these items remain in proximity, within reach of their (former) owners? By looking at objects and people's attachments to them, Miller suggests that "academics can strive for understanding and empathy through the study of what people do with objects because that is the way the people... create a world of practice" (19). On the question "Why things matter?," Miller suggests that the term "matter" points to thinking not about the significance of an object, but about concerns such as the attachments held by people to certain objects. Miller (9) writes that it is through thinking about matter and the objects' mattering, that we could "unpick the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms...."

Sending some of the photographs from this series to the owner of my apartment unit, she replied, "Old Shanghai lifestyle," preceded by a happy smiley (Figure 8). For the owner of the apartment that I am renting, these photographs bring back memories of an aesthetic or heritage that can now only be recalled as "old" – therefore under-threat, and potentially completely vanished in the future. Historian of Shanghai Qin Shao (16-31) has already argued that the rise of skyscrapers in Shanghai has come at the cost of obliterating spaces of historical significance such as lane houses, simultaneously erasing significant parts of the city's cultural history. On the one hand, some high-end shops that arise from these very spaces that had wiped out traces of the city's past, capitalize on the aesthetics of "Old Shanghai," playing up nostalgia for what was lost due to their very arrival. The past, thus, becomes transformed into an urban aesthetic that is simultaneously tokenized and

exploited for the circulation of capital, even if the same capital has broken them apart.

It could be that these “left-behind” objects on the staircase landings appear to be disorienting to me precisely because of their deep contrast with the clean and sanitized streets of Shanghai – the only version of the city that I know. In organizing Shanghai’s landscape, elements reminiscent of what the owner of my apartment called “Old Shanghai” was disappeared, rendering the appearance of objects that have become outmoded by fashion trends and technology into antiquated “oddities.” For example, commonly found on the staircase landings are steel bikes that appear to have been unused for years, rusted by time. The bicycles on the streets of Shanghai today are predominantly those operated by a wide network of bike sharing mobile applications, activated by mobile electronic payments, and thus fueled by capital.



Fig. 8. A vintage trunk rests on the 14th floor. Seeing this photograph, the owner of the apartment that I rent says such objects remind them of “Old Shanghai.” Photo credit: Dada Docot.

Mess as “Symbolic Protest”

At the beginning of summer 2017, the concrete and iron fences (which were in decent enough shape) enclosing the apartment buildings in our residential block were torn down. I anticipated change; I looked forward to the installation of new ones with a different shape, design, or color. I was surprised, and honestly quite confused, that they were replaced with fences of exactly the same look. Reflecting on the standardization of designs for plazas and residential villas all over China, Abramson writes that there is a dominant view among Chinese officials that “standardization is not only the means to economic development and political success but also as the very expression, the *evidence*, of that success” (219, italics in original). If the blocks and the streets are getting refurbished within the same aesthetic, and at breakneck speed, I am somehow comforted by spaces that transform in some ways with new additions and

surprises, and that are also just there at rest, some of them carefully wrapped to protect them from the elements, but not yet their turn to be “dealt with” (Figure 9).



Fig. 9. A wrapped object to perhaps be protected from dust is found on the 2nd floor landing. Photo credit: Dada Docot.

I am apprehended by the paradoxical quality of these objects on the staircase landings. They appear to be unwanted in the homes of their owners. In the meantime, they have not been sent off to recycling centers or landfills, which spurs me to imagine that they will perhaps be retrieved or repaired by their owners in due time. It is here that I think of these objects following Neferti Tadiar's (166) view on the “activist potential in the temporality in stagnation.” Borrowing from Tadiar's analysis of the “undersides of development” amid Manila's ambitions for creating of screen of success and spectacle to attract global capital, I suggest an understanding of the clutter found on Shanghai apartment staircase landings as symbolic manifestations of what cannot be managed, controlled and regulated by capital-oriented regimes. Following Tadiar, I propose to think of these objects on the staircase landings as “symbolic protests.” Located within the city but falling outside the reach of the city's regulatory schemes, I suggest that these objects materialize the ways that Shanghai residents resist, refuse, or delay their participation in, the universalizing order being mapped throughout a global/izing city.

One month into my lease, I texted the owner of the apartment to ask what I should do with the furniture and with the many old items piled a meter from the apartment's door that stretched towards the neighbor's, and that block most of the corridor. It is in fact not only staircase landings that have become transformed into storage areas but also corridors and other common spaces in the apartment building. The owner replied that those items are old things taken out of the next-door apartment, in effect hinting that there was nothing they could do from their end. Understanding my contention that the pile poses a fire

hazard as it blocks a significant part of the hallway, the owner told me the following day that they had informed the local police who would be dropping by soon for inspection. The following day, I informed the owner that the apartment across the elevator started renovating, and they had placed construction materials on the staircase landings of our floor, completely blocking access to the stairways. "This is Chinese style. Believe it will get better soon," the owner replied. Perhaps the policemen indeed came to visit, as the construction materials were moved to a corner of the corridor the following day. As to the pile beside my apartment – it is still there until today, unmoved, and with additional objects layered on top, reaching out further towards the ceiling.

What do we make of the "mess" on the landings and in other common spaces in apartment buildings if, according to Daniel Abramson, inherent in Chinese urbanization is messiness itself? Sometimes, recyclers prowl the corridors of the building to gather empty boxes or PET bottles left by the front door of many apartments. It would appear that the clutter on the staircase, many of the items without due labels, cannot be simply taken away. I argue that the element of liminality of the staircase landings as a "common" space for use by residents but as storage of "personal" effects still within reach of their respective owners, gives these objects a new value. Their presence in spaces that are supposedly for common use stands for the apartment residents' *unspoken consensus* to remain unassimilable into Shanghai's vision for its future. Literature has shown that residents in the cities assert their influence on the space that is organized by the state, rather than the other way around (Wu 222-42). Therefore, these objects point to how leftover objects in the city transform into what Tadiar calls "a medium of relations" (168). The owner of the apartment that I am renting referred to a "Chinese style" of living amid, and of the non-management of, the clutter sprawling on the building. I suggest that this particular "Chinese style" of *not* regulating mess in common spaces points to an interesting state-citizen dynamic. The agents of the state such as the police appear to remain unable to intrude into the preferences for "dis/order" that can be found in the common spaces of residential buildings, even if the cityscape quickly transforms to share an aesthetic that is common to "successful" and highly surveilled smart cities. Therefore, I propose to think of this "mess" as manifesting one of the ways that city residents disrupt and disturb the state's utopic project of sanitizing Shanghai.

This story about "messiness" is not unique to Shanghai. For example, comparable examples of messiness and how they are "othered" by the state and by strangers have already been chronicled in an edited collection on expanding and rising Asian megacities such as Manila, Hong Kong, Mumbai and others (Hou and Chalana 1-21). Similar to Shanghai, in other Asian cities persist "entrenched cultural norms and traditional spatial practices" amid the sustained efforts to organize spaces (4). As Jeffrey Hou and Manish Chalana (3) write about Asian cities, "Crowded, bustling, layered, constantly shifting, and seemingly messy, these sites and activities possess order and hierarchy often visible and comprehensible only to their participants, thereby escaping common

understanding and appreciation". They write that as a consequence, "messiness" in cities becomes othered, occupying a category that includes the "'disorderly,' incomprehensible, and unacceptable" (4). The objects that rest on the staircase landings – unmanaged, undealt with – I suggest, speak of the "urban conditions and processes that do not follow institutionalized or culturally prescribed notions of order" (Hou and Chalana 4).

"Mess" as Disruption

The apartment owner's reference to these staircase landing objects as inciting a memory of Old Shanghai, alludes not only to significant economic, political and historical transformations in the city, but to everyday humdrum – such as when the empty bird cage on the 21st floor was still home to its feathered resident whose twittering perhaps echoed through the corridors (Figure 10). Stored in a common space that is out of their immediate sight and care but on the other hand still near enough to be kept an eye on, do these objects still tug at their owners? What meals were cooked from the ingredients chilled in the refrigerator that stands on the 3rd floor, curiously blanketed in black textile and kept shut by a red ribbon (Figure 11)?



Fig. 10. The cage on Floor 21 is missing its resident. Photo credit: Dada Docot.



Fig. 11. A refrigerator standing tall on the 3rd floor landing was perhaps secured with a blanket and ribbon to prevent other residents from adding objects inside it. Photo credit: Dada Docot.

On the 20th stairway landing on which I reside, which I glimpse daily as the elevator door closes, a tired-looking bedside table and wooden panels have been added to the pile (Figure 12). Perhaps their owner will repaint the table, or perhaps they are waiting for recyclers to come by one day. The kiddie bike on my floor will perhaps rest there for a very long time like all others on the stairways. Perhaps its owner will take it out for a ride on a better day.



Fig. 12. The collection on the 20th floor landing has increased to include disassembled furniture pieces since this photograph was taken in March 2018. Photo credit: Dada Docot.

The photographs in this essay show some of the things that fall away from Shanghai's determined vertical rise. Contained in some of these spaces that make up Shanghai's skyline are traces of its residents' stubborn persistence to let some part of their personal memories linger a little bit longer. They do this partly by extending the lives of the material traces of their past by allowing

“mess” to reside in spaces such as staircase landings. What would otherwise be construed as “mess” adds texture to a cityscape that is fast-reconstructed by regimes of development centered on capital and finance.

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