

Popular China

Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society

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When a House Becomes His Home

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In this connection it must be noted that the weight of private property rights as a factor in (determining) the status of women . . . is being drastically reduced by the socialization of the Chinese economy. . . . By the end of 1958 . . . the people's communes replaced the agricultural producers cooperatives as the national form of rural production. The individual or the family no longer owns land, business enterprise, or any other significant means of production, and private property is reduced mainly to personal articles with private ownership of houses in serious doubt.

It is obvious that as private property ceases to be a major factor in status stratification, redistribution of property rights can serve only in a limited way in the alteration of the status of family members. It is the equalizing right to work outside the family, not property rights, that will serve that function."

—C. K. Yang, *The Chinese Family in the Communist Revolution*

In December 1978, twenty years after Mao's Great Leap Forward, Deng Xiaoping took the first steps to dismantle the people's communes and recommodify property relations throughout China. In the first decade of reform, privatization of urban real estate was not a major objective, and even after twenty years of market reform, only a third of urban homes were owner occupied.¹ Nevertheless, the nationwide experiments to sell existing housing stock to sitting tenants begun in the mid-1980s and the subsequent expansion of a private housing industry after 1992 to stimulate the economy and attract foreign investment had a profound impact on contemporary urban society.²

Under Mao, private ownership had been stigmatized as antisocialist. In the final years of Deng's leadership, the central government would look to private real estate development as an engine of economic growth, and among the general population home ownership would come to signify social and financial suc-

cess.³ In this environment, whether or not a family purchased its home, the new legitimacy of individual property rights granted all urban residents permission to dream of home ownership and to view their homes as a private space in which they could display family and individual prestige.

Previously, when historians of Western societies analyzed the role of the home during eras of rapid commercialization, they observed a marked feminization of domestic space as urban men ceded the home to wives and concentrated their own energies on the expanded opportunities for sociability in the public sphere of clubs and politics. Auslander even argues that as France built the republic in the second half of the nineteenth century there was an explicit dichotomy: "bourgeois men were (encouraged) to represent the family through the vote, and women to represent the family in their bodies and their homes."⁴ In the United States Veblen also saw the home as the quintessential location in which wives "reworked" the economic success of their husbands into a heightened social prestige for all family members. Randall Collins described a similar feminization of domestic property among upper-middle-class American men after World War II.⁵

Yet it is not obvious that domestic space must be primarily the domain of women. In fact, the feminization observed in Europe and the United States is more likely the exception than the rule. Throughout the world, wives' claims to property are generally weaker than those of husbands. Also notable is the larger political environment in which citizens or subjects nurture unofficial sociability and associational life. In societies with longer traditions of democratic governments there is less control and censorship over public sociability and therefore less need for men to use the privacy of the home to socialize or nurture nonofficial social ties. By contrast in societies where leaders routinely censored public sociability, the home became a primary site for unofficial male associational life, and females were often restricted to certain locations within their own homes and denied control over the use or disposal of domestic property.⁶

In the case of imperial and even republican China, wives were identified as *neiren* (the person within) and to those unfamiliar with the history of China this designation may suggest that the Chinese home was traditionally a female domain while space outside the home was the domain of men. But as anyone familiar with Chinese history can attest, the *nei-wai* distinction rather than validating female claims over domestic property or space indicated the subordinate and excluded position of married women. Thus, for example, when Susan Mann wrote about the Jiangnan elite in "China's long eighteenth century" she not only rejected the equation of *nei* as female space and *wai* as male space but concluded that the women's chambers (*guige*) were actually "willed by men to be a refuge for men."⁷

My own earlier work on interior space and urban family life in Shanghai during the 1980s, however, found a clear departure from pre-Communist patterns as described by Mann for Ming-Qing China or by C. K. Yang for the republican era. When I interviewed one hundred women living in one residential estate

north of Suzhou creek in 1987, I saw households in which wives' control over domestic space was equal to, or even greater than that of their husbands or coresident married sons.⁸ Because the neighborhood in which I carried out interviews had been constructed with a uniform architecture, all flats had two rooms; because my sample required that each household have at least one woman born between 1925 and 1935, the families were all at the stage in which adult children were launching careers and marrying. Among the interviewees the most typical household was a patrilocal home with a middle-aged couple, one married son, his wife, and one grandchild.⁹ Typically the husband's employer had arranged the rental and the apartment was registered in the man's name. However, because the collectivization of urban real estate had transformed housing into a welfare benefit, husbands legally had had no greater claims of ownership than did their wives, and the sons' inheritance rights to the parental home were as weak as the daughters'. Although predominantly patrilocal in structure, tenancy claims did not privilege men for these families. Rather, the situation followed C. K. Yang, who "noted that the weight of private property rights as a factor in [determining] the status of women . . . [has been] drastically reduced by the socialization of the Chinese economy."¹⁰

When I looked closely at the way in which interior space had been decorated and asked respondents about daily routines, I discovered a gender "tilt" in accord with the Western European experience of feminization of domestic space. Because each room had multiple functions—bedroom, living room, dining room, study, and workspace—the apartments were crowded with things and furnished in the most utilitarian fashion. The possessions of women in their roles as housekeepers and mothers—sewing baskets, candy dishes, utensils for cleaning and cooking—filled the cabinets and covered the tables. Typically decorations were limited to a wall clock, a calendar, and family photos displayed under a glass tabletop. Awards from the workplace, souvenirs of business trips, chess sets, or artifacts of the masculine "scholars studio" such as calligraphy brushes, ink stones, or ceramic bowls, were generally invisible. Thus I hypothesized that collectivization of domestic property and transformation of housing into a welfare benefit had feminized or more specifically "maternalized" control over urban domestic space. Chinese urban homes of the 1980s were best described as "my mother's house" rather than "my father's house."¹¹ Or to use the vocabulary of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, Shanghai men had apparently "cooled out their relationship to the home."¹²

Young and middle-aged Shanghainese whom I met that summer also seemed to emphasize the female character of city residences and routinely referred to their parents' homes, whether their fathers were alive or not, as their "mother's house" (*wo muqin de jia*). Subsequently male friends from Shanghai have told me that they would probably refer to their natal home as *wo laojia*, and colleagues from northern China have reported that they never used nor heard other men

use *wo muqin de jia*, suggesting that female-centered domestic space may be restricted to southern China or even to the city of Shanghai.¹³

Historian Hanchao Lu has also questioned my interpretation, but in a different way. Instead of denying that men might also call their parents' home their mother's house, Lu notes that because in pre-Communist years women used mother's house (*niangjia*) and not father's house to describe their natal home, it is not obvious that the use of *wo muqin de jia* is anything more than a modern translation of a traditional phrase. Therefore what is most intriguing to Lu about my respondents' language in 1987 is not a break from the past but a revealing continuity.¹⁴ Next I discuss change and continuity, using materials gathered in the late 1990s to explore the possibility that reprivatization of home ownership has favored male over female claims to domestic space and property.

MARKETING THE DREAM OF HOME OWNERSHIP

On June 4, 1999, a twenty-foot-high balloon soared above the reflecting pool of the Shanghai Exhibition Center to announce the opening of the seventh Shanghai Real Estate Exhibition. Inside, 189 development companies had rented space to showcase their commercial offerings. According to the evening newspaper of that day the apartments featured at the exhibition represented 60 percent of all available properties in greater Shanghai,¹⁵ and indeed vendors featured a wide selection of apartments and villas in all districts of the city and surrounding counties.

In 1995 I had attended an auto show in the same venue. Admission was by ticket only, and the gleaming Porsches, Mercedes, and BMWs were priced beyond individual means. My colleague's husband, who was the vice president of a profitable instrument factory, was in the market for a secondhand motorcycle. After we left the exhibit, we posed in front of the reflecting pool to commemorate our outing and then pushed our way back to the street, where scalpers hawked tickets and the crowd spilling into the street blocked traffic.

In 1999 anyone could enter the exhibition hall and the sponsors were actually promoting a lottery to boost attendance. Inside the main entrance, employees of two local banks distributed application materials for individual loans for home purchase, home renovation, or real estate investment. I arrived at 10 A.M., one hour after the doors had opened, and already the long corridors were packed. That summer there was a glut of unsold space. Developers therefore courted customers and the socialist economy of shortage in which would-be tenants were "supplicants of the state" seemed a distant memory.¹⁶ Of course it was impossible to gauge the actual intentions or financial resources of the milling crowds. Were they simply gawking at inaccessible luxury as we previously had gazed at the sports cars? Or were they serious buyers? Certainly the brochures from the banks documented practical steps for securing ownership. Equally incontrovertible was

the professionalism of the exhibitors. They may have been marketing a dream, but they aggressively touted their good prices and methodically pushed the visitor-voyeurs to sign up for an afternoon van tour.

When historian David Fraser compared Shanghai housing advertisements in 1994 to those in 1997, he found that developers had increasingly sought customers through promises of exclusive lifestyle rather than simply the prospect of ownership. In Fraser's words the ideal of the home as a private "oasis (had) moved into the foreground."¹⁷ In 1999 the advertisers continued to market luxury and exclusivity, but property values and affordability shared the foreground.

In their brochures and videos the developers advertising at the June 4 exhibition addressed an ungendered but upwardly mobile customer.¹⁸ On the Friday morning when I visited, males slightly outnumbered females, but in the illustrated material from the Bank of Industry and Commerce the prototypical customer was more often a woman than a man. Generally the video clips of newly completed interiors excluded any resident and illustrations of the exteriors featured anonymous pedestrians of both sexes. To the extent that they had a targeted buyer, marketers wanted men and women of all ages to imagine themselves as potential owners.

Promotional materials from two of the most expensive complexes, however, did have explicitly gendered messages. In the brochure for Joffre Gardens (Dongfang Bali) under construction in the heart of the old French Settlement, the featured customer was a glamorous man in his thirties who carried a small boy on his shoulders as he strolled through a field of flowers. The large caption described him as "the New Age man who loves his family and home" (*xinshidai aijia de nanren*), and then in the smaller type the prospective customer reads that this "New Age man" was "the good father who is the first to send his child off to school, the good leader who is the first to arrive in the office, and the good husband who is the first to return home" (*diyige songhaizi de hao baba, diyige dao gongsi de hao lingdao, diyige huijia de haozhangfu*). None of the other flyers for upscale developments included a comparable profile of an ideal female customer. However, Kathleen Erwin, who has analyzed the speech in Shanghai radio shows,¹⁹ has asked me whether the target here is an affluent woman for whom the New Age man is the ideal husband or a financially successful man eager to identify himself as the good leader.²⁰ In one housing advertisement that Fraser found, would-be buyers are enticed to "buy a home and become a boss!"²¹ I would suggest that the agents for Joffre Gardens want to entice both men and women to buy a flat through identification with success. Not incidentally the graphic image of the success of the late 1990s is a handsome young businessman.

Advertisements for Hua'an apartments in the fashionable Jingan district in the old International Settlement made the most explicit pitch to a male buyer, designating a male as the targeted customer and the home as the female object. In this advertisement (which proclaimed in English "I love Jingan") there were no male persons, but the Chinese text explicitly described the housing complex

as the beloved female whom the buyer loves for her incomparable taste. The word used for taste, *weidao*, connotes something tasty to eat; the word *pinwei* would denote refinement.²² Not surprisingly, none of these promotional brochures presented a home as the male object of female desire.

Overall, however, the exhibitors relied on a conjugal vocabulary that spoke simultaneously to husbands and wives. The message in the materials from the Shanghai branch of the Bank of Industry and Commerce was explicit. Above the bank's logo was a photo of a heavy golden door swinging open to a vista of three modern apartment towers. Printed over the photo was a list of eight types of personal loans, and below the photo the title: "A Compass to Mortgage Loans for Individual Purchase of a Home [*geren goufang anjie daikuan*]." On the left of the photo, the English phrase "Our Home" ran the entire length of the pamphlet. Here the bank represented the residential property of the 1990s as not only privatized and commodified but overtly centered around a couple strategizing to create a home of their own.

A CONJUGAL HOME: RESULTS FROM A SURVEY

A conjugal profile also emerged during home interviews conducted in Shanghai in December 1998 as part of a project I designed with Yanjie Bian and Shaoguang Wang on urban consumption patterns. As part of this project our team interviewed one hundred Shanghai couples about their current household situation and their plans for the near future.²³ Although each member of the couple was interviewed separately, husbands and wives rarely disagreed about issues related to their home. For example, when asked about the necessity of homeownership, in only five cases did one spouse say home ownership was essential while the other said it was not.²⁴ They gave almost identical answers when asked about the value of the home, its size, and the amount they had spent refurbishing. These high levels of agreement about the need for home ownership and the financial details of their current home confirmed the general impression that homes of the 1990s were a shared marital property. Equally noteworthy, when asked to identify the names of all family members listed on a rental agreement, mortgage, or deed, less than 10 percent of couples listed a parent or an in-law as a coowner or householder.²⁵ In terms of property claims, these were homes of married men and women, not coresident sons or daughters or members of an extended family.

However, joint ownership or tenancy was exceptional and men were by far the most likely to be the sole name on the deed or rental agreement.²⁶ But would it be accurate to conclude that "my mother's house" (*wo muqin de jia*) of the 1980s had become "my husband's home" (*wo zhangfu de jia*)? During the interviews and casual conversations, I never heard this phrase. Rather like the design of the bank brochure, the more commonly used phrases were "our home" (*women de jia*) and "my home" (*wo de jia*). Nevertheless, discussions about home renovation

among our December 1998 survey respondents suggested a tendency for the house to become his home when real estate property became the focus of major investment.

FURNISHING AND RENOVATING THE CONJUGAL HOME

During the first decade of economic reform, urban families enthusiastically spent their savings on their first color television, first refrigerator, and first washing machine.²⁷ Some families repainted walls, installed tile flooring, or bought a new suite of bedroom furniture, but the main improvements were consumer durables that eased the drudgery of housework and retained their financial value. During my 1987 visits I noticed that prereform attitudes about appropriate display (as much as concerns about economizing) curbed expenditures and kept decorative improvements modest. Many people seemed to worry that neighbors would be critical—even hostile—if they discovered a family other than a recently married couple spending lavishly to make their home more comfortable than other homes in their community. Wallpaper or curtains were exceptional, and wooden floors so extravagant—perhaps even decadent—that I remember one respondent who went out of her way to hide the wooden blocks her son was using to lay a parquet floor to keep them from her neighbor's view. Over coffee one night with a university teacher who had just recently returned as a legal tenant to her family's house, the three guests marveled at the small English creamer, the only remaining piece of what had been a complete set of china at her marriage in 1956.

By the late 1990s, however, there had been a paradigm shift. Men and women of all ages felt free to use their homes to display economic success or cultural refinement. Large-circulation decorating magazines urged readers to leave behind the older simple styles and strive to furnish their homes in richer cultural taste (*gengfuyou wenhua pinwei*).²⁸ Even the educational channel controlled by the municipal government sponsored an evening show on home renovation. The male decorator who hosted the show prefaced his first demonstration by noting "that as soon as one enters an apartment, you know immediately whether the residents have taste (*you pinwei*)."²⁹

Throughout the city, neighborhood shops sold the supplies needed to install parquet floors, recessed lighting, and upscale bathroom fixtures. Bookstores devoted entire sections to home improvement publications. New Web sites and television programs instructed viewers how to decorate their new home or renovate the old.³⁰ In 1987 household furnishings had been minimal and utilitarian; by the late 1990s merchandise was plentiful and styles were often indistinguishable from those found in North American or European magazines. Ikea was a popular destination of both young and middle-aged Shanghai residents and Toto,

American Standard, and Simmons advertised heavily on billboards throughout the city.

The impact of the new global styles is evident in the decorator magazines sold in state-run bookstores, small kiosks, and even the newly opened Shanghai library.³¹ In these magazines the home is a happy nest, a warm and cozy place, in which residents (*zhuren*) display (*tixian*) their cultivation (*xiuyang*), personality (*xingge*), and economic power (*jingji shili*).³² Like the developers' brochures, the interior decorating magazines addressed a gender-neutral *zhuren* or *fangzhu*; the illustrations, like the real estate videos, omitted residents of either sex. In the bookstores I observed as many men as women reading the decorating magazines, and the targets of promotional materials seemed androgynous.

In December 1998 my colleagues and I asked the Shanghai couples in our consumer study who had renovated their apartment to identify the individuals who had participated in the process. We found that more husbands than wives had been active in finalizing plans, buying materials, supervising labor, and managing the finances (see table 10.1). Only in choosing furniture and interior decoration were wives as likely to be involved as husbands.

When I designed a 1997 pilot study about home renovation in Shanghai and Shenzhen, I also found that husbands were as deeply involved in renovating their homes as their wives and in many cases claimed to have taken the lead. When we observed customers in furniture stores that summer, men outnumbered women in the areas displaying couches, desks, and dining room tables. And when we took simple inventories of wall decorations in the living rooms, the husband's possessions and signs of distinction were more numerous than those of the wife. It appeared that the higher the income and the greater the authority of the husband in the workplace, the more clearly had the house become his home.³³ Subsequent interviews with working-class and professional men in 1998 and 1999 revealed that men wanted to claim a space distinct from the bedroom in which

Table 10.1 Participation in Decisions about Home Renovation

	Husbands (%)	Wives (%)
1. Raised issue of renovation	79	70
2. Discussed initial renovation plan	79	71
3. Decided final renovation plan	76	63 ^a
4. Bought materials	72	41 ^c
5. Hired workers	79	26 ^c
6. Supervised workers	54	29 ^c
7. Chose furniture and decorations	83	80
8. Managed renovation budget	74	57 ^b
9. Personally did some renovation work	26	19

Source: Consumer Project, December 1998.

^a $p \leq .01$; ^b $p \leq 0.05$; ^c $p \leq 0.001$

they could entertain friends or enjoy their hobbies. The following home interviews illustrate this pattern. They also document the remarkable improvement in the quality of residential conditions since the Mao years as well as the impact of home ownership on investments in a family home.

Teacher Chen's Mao Button Collection

When we visited him in June 1999, Teacher Chen entertained my research team enthusiastically in his bedroom/sitting room. He was a generous host and served coffee accompanied by a rich array of cookies and chocolates purchased to celebrate his daughter's recent wedding. The room of twelve square meters was stuffed with furniture and memorabilia. A large double bed occupied one-third of the floor while two chairs and a small table created a sitting space in front of the veranda that faced the street. In one corner, as remote from the kitchen as physically possible, stood a small refrigerator, on top of which were displayed several dolls and an inflated plastic replica of a roll of Charms lifesavers. All the remaining wall space was filled with bookshelves, cabinets, and tables piled high with suitcases and boxes.

In many ways the room reminded me of the "mothers' homes" I had visited in 1987. One entered the five-story, unpainted cement block apartment building from a dark, dirty stairwell. Each apartment opened onto a narrow corridor, jammed with old wicker baskets, rusted bikes, and wet mops. Inside the apartment the walls were green, the floors scuffed, and the furniture a mixture of a few simple wooden stools, screened kitchen cupboards, and assorted pieces of a bedroom suite. Over Teacher Chen's bed, there was a colorized, formal photo of a couple standing shoulder to shoulder in their 1961 wedding suits. Beneath the photo was a calendar with a red racing car and on the back of the door another calendar with a traditional Chinese landscape painting.

But in many other ways the apartment was not at all like those "mothers' homes" I had visited in 1987. First, the Chens were homeowners, not renters. In 1995 they had purchased the home through the wife's unit for ¥9,000, and Teacher Chen now holds the title—in his name alone—to a valuable property in central Shanghai worth more than ¥200,000. Even before they bought the flat, they had invested ¥5,000 to redecorate and he proclaims he would never move, no matter how much money he was offered. He told us later that he and his wife had offered the home to their daughter and her new husband and planned to move to a larger flat that they had bought for ¥65,000 in eastern Pudong with help from his old unit. But the son-in-law preferred to move into an apartment that his mother had arranged in Hong Qiao district.

The commercialization and affluence of the 1990s distinguished this apartment also through the furnishings and decoration. Above the head of the Chens' bed and on the opposite wall were two framed color photographs of their daughter posing as if for a fashion magazine. The English words "Happy to you" had

been embossed across a diaphanous yellow scarf she held under her chin. Across from the foot of the bed was a large-screen color television, a VCR, and a Karaoke microphone.

Finally, the apartment reflected the ways in which Teacher Chen wanted to relax and entertain his guests. The shelves displayed many different wine bottles to which he drew attention when he discussed how much he enjoyed socializing. When I asked what room he would add if he could have another room, he answered promptly, "I would add a big living room. We can sleep in any old small room, but if we had a big living room I would read, watch TV, and sing karaoke there. I like to drink wine and would like to invite guests here to have a good time."

And then Teacher Chen stood up from the folding chair on which he had been sitting opposite me and started to pull out twenty battered boxes from the drawers of a cabinet under his TV. For the next forty minutes we listened as he told with relish and pride how he had acquired his nearly 7,000 Mao buttons. The display was dazzling. He had them organized by size and then by material. In each box there were five or six layers of treasures, each pin carefully sewn onto a cloth or paper sheet. In one box there were only plastic circles of less than an inch in diameter, in another only ceramic ovals with the Great Helmsman gazing into the mountains or over the sea. He said that he had been offered hundreds of yuan for certain pins but had never sold one. He continues to build his collection, visiting markets to look for rare finds and occasionally trading with other collectors.

In 1987 he had already begun the button collection, and perhaps if I had asked then about his leisure time or hobbies he would have treated me to the same lavish display and hospitality. But in the homes I visited in 1987, husbands usually expressed no interest in joining the interview, and no one—male or female—offered to show me treasures that they had hidden away.

Auntie Li's Dropped Ceiling

I first met Auntie Li in 1990 when she was a neighborhood cadre. We worked together on a daily basis for six weeks during one of Shanghai's severe heat waves, and I was forever grateful that I had been assigned a colleague of such unflagging goodwill. When I returned in 1995 to do a third follow-up study, she officially became part of the neighborhood sample and I began to learn more about her family history. In 1997 I missed a chance to visit because she was traveling, but in June 1999 I was able to spend a Saturday afternoon chatting with her husband, son, daughter-in-law, and grandson.

The recommodification of real estate and the keen interest in renovation had left an imprint on their home. Like Teacher Chen and perhaps the majority of Shanghaiese now in their early sixties, Auntie Li had been born in the countryside. In 1947, when she was nine years old, she came to Shanghai for primary

school. After her father became disabled, she took his place as a shift worker in a large textile mill. When I asked her to tell me about her earliest homes in the village and then in Shanghai, she uncharacteristically said she could remember nothing: "We, my mom and the three kids, just slept in a series of little rooms. My dad worked shifts; he only came home a few times each month."

In 1956, when she became a full-time worker, she too moved into a dorm at the mill. Four years later she married a man she met through an introduction by her sister's friend. When I asked about the size and neighborhood of her home after marriage, she refused to give details, saying that at first they had a small room of their own. In 1962, after the birth of her daughter, her mother-in-law came from the countryside. Between 1962 and 1970 they moved from one small room to another. I asked if it were not inconvenient to keep moving all the furniture and possessions. She replied, "What furniture? We had very little, we had my mother-in-law, two kids, and no money. So we really had nothing to move."

In 1970, as part of Mao's policy to build a third industrial front in remote areas, Auntie Li was transferred to work in a mountainous area of Fujian province. Her family stayed behind, and for the next fourteen years she only saw them once a year until she took retirement at age forty-six. In 1987, after her daughter married, she moved to their current apartment on the top floor of a six-story walk-up with her husband and son. The interior space is divided into two bed-sitting-rooms, a kitchen alcove, a toilet room, and a small balcony. Since 1989, when their son married, he and his wife have taken over the smaller bedroom as their own while Auntie Li and her husband claimed the larger room with its veranda as their bedroom/sitting room and the family living and dining room.

The impact of the economic changes of the 1990s on the home interior and the family's claims on the space is apparent. In 1994 they bought the apartment from the husband's steel factory for under ¥10,000, and today it is worth ten times as much. Like Teacher Chen, they do not expect to sell or move. They are happy with the location, and neither they nor their son and his wife have the resources to buy anything better. When I discussed her apartment in 1995, Auntie Li was singularly unenthusiastic and complained about the leaking roof and the drafty windows, saying to refurbish was really a waste of money. But four years later her husband had solved these problems by installing a dropped ceiling that allowed them to replace any section stained by mildew or rust. And on the dreary rainy day I visited, it was surprisingly bright and airy.

They had modified the entry and reconfigured the space outside the bedroom/sitting room. Just inside the front door they had laid a checkerboard of black and white tiles that echoed the squares of their bed-sitting-room and defined a small dining area. They had enclosed the kitchen sink and gas burners so that the kitchen could be closed off from the rest of the apartment. However, they could not afford to create a separate living room. Their large wooden bed still took up a third of the floor space, and the rest of the room was crowded with the sofa, a large chiffonier without a mirror, and the old screened kitchen cabinet that they

had brought from their first apartment. Yet they had made some efforts to refurbish. In front of the sofa, they placed a low table that her husband had built and painted to match the white ceiling panels and a new large-screen television stood opposite. On the veranda her husbands kept a large cage for his homing pigeons, but we saw nothing as large and visible that was exclusively the focus of Auntie Li's hobbies.

When asked what room she would add if they had the money to relocate, she answered immediately: a room (*fangzi*) of our own. Both her son and husband nodded in agreement: "Ideally we would like our own *fangzi* with our own toilet and kitchen, and then my son and his family could have this apartment for themselves. Right now they have moved back to live with my daughter-in-law's mother because officially the household registration (*hukou*) of my daughter-in-law and my grandson are still with her mother and that is where he can go to primary school without paying extra fees. So during the week they live there, and then on the weekend they come back and stay with us. But probably we will all stay here forever because to move costs a lot of money (which we don't have). My son and daughter-in-law do not have good jobs and there is talk of layoffs."

Auntie Li's daughter has always lived in one small room with her mother-in-law. Now in addition to her husband, her mother-in-law, and her son, there is also a young niece. But Auntie Li is actually more optimistic that her daughter, unlike her son or herself, will eventually have a conjugal home because the home they share with her son-in-law's mother has been scheduled for demolition and by law the city is required to rehouse each adult generation in separate apartments. If they can afford to purchase ownership, they will become homeowners. In any case, the government guarantees that they will be able to rent a self-contained apartment in a new building.

STAKING A CLAIM: OWNERSHIP AND GENDER

In the early 1990s the central leadership resolved to accelerate privatization of urban real estate. At the 1991 March Work Conference, Li Peng pushed leaders to design local initiatives to popularize ownership, and the State Council announced that home ownership should become the norm among the nonmigrant urban population.³⁴ Over the next two years, municipal leaders throughout China took steps to further monetize—if not necessarily privatize—residency claims on new real estate by recalculating rents to reflect market demand and require large deposits among new renters. Shanghai, under the leadership of Zhu Rongji, led the way by establishing the first provident fund for individual home purchases in May 1991. Guangzhou followed in April 1992.³⁵ In February 1995 the State Council launched the *Anju Gongcheng* program to establish provident funds as the primary means to promote home ownership among low- and middle-income families.³⁶ Subsequent banking reforms enabled an increasing number of

families to take out home mortgages, with particular gains in fall 1996 and spring 1997.³⁷

At the end of 1994 30 percent of non-migrant households held some type of ownership claim. Three years later ownership rates reached 33 percent.³⁸ Surveys conducted between 1997 and 1999 suggested that the desire for home ownership remained strong even after the slowdown in economic growth.³⁹ Overall, housing reforms of the 1990s launched a sustained recommercialization of urban real estate and popularized the ideal of home ownership.

In our Shanghai interviews, an overwhelming majority of men and women responded that home ownership was now a necessity for families and ownership generally improved the quality of housing.⁴⁰ When we compared attitudes of homeowners with those who were still renting, we discovered some noticeable and statistically significant differences between husbands and wives. First, in response to a global question about rating their overall life satisfaction, homeowners of both sexes were more likely to say they were satisfied than renters, but only among men was the difference statistically significant.⁴¹ Second, ownership increased the likelihood of respondents' reporting that they had private space (*siren kongjian*) in their home, but among husbands the gain by owners over renters was larger than among wives.⁴² Third, ownership increased the likelihood of respondents' saying that their name appeared on the title to the house; again, gains of male owners were greater than those of females. Because men were far more likely to hold the title, whether the home was owned or rented, ownership appeared to have intensified male control over family property.⁴³

Clearly there is an interaction with class. Ownership levels are highest among the best-educated managerial and professional ranks, and thus what we may be seeing is that high-status men are more likely than lower-status men to assert dominance in the home. Or it may be a question of space. Because wealthier men have larger homes, they are able to claim space for their own use. Tellingly, however, in these larger homes, wives were no more likely to claim space of their own than were wives in the smaller rented apartments. A final case study of a middle-aged couple who for years had relied on the wife's employer to solve their housing problems illustrates how home ownership may strengthen male claims over domestic property and private space.

The Calligrapher Cadre

The Yangs and their fifteen-year-old daughter live in a two-bedroom flat of eighty-five square meters purchased in 1996 through his unit and now registered exclusively in his name. Although both Mr. and Mrs. Yang both said they were unsure (*bu haoshuo*) if home ownership was definitely necessary for all families, it has been extremely important to Mr. Yang.

Like most Shanghai couples who married in the early 1980s, they began their married life in the household of his parents. It was a single room in Yang Pu

district, where he had grown up with his two siblings. After their daughter was born, they became a household of six adults and a baby. Shortly thereafter Mrs. Yang's employer arranged for them to rent a tiny room near the old railroad station on the grounds of hardship. Three years later, her unit again helped the family by finding a four-room apartment in Hong Qiao, where they moved with his parents and (then) unmarried brother. The next year the brother married, and by 1990 they were a joint household of eight. Again Mrs. Yang's unit tried to solve their housing problem by renting them a second apartment for the exclusive use of the Yangs and their daughter. However, the second room could only be accessed through the first room, which meant the daughter slept on a folding bed next to her father's calligraphy table.

Finally in 1996 the hotel where Mr. Yang worked as a manager arranged for them to buy a ¥300,000 apartment for ¥40,000. The house is simply furnished and almost all the furniture is new. The walls are white, and the floors all gleaming light woods. The only decorations on the walls are paintings and calligraphy done by the husband. The second bedroom is set up as a calligrapher's studio. The daughter still sleeps on a folding cot, and she and her belongings seem to have left almost no impression on the house. The kitchen has not been modified, but the bathroom was renovated to resemble those in the husband's hotel.

Like Auntie Li, the Yangs would like to buy again. But Mrs. Yang, who is a well-paid accountant, is certain that the apartment is worth considerably less than when they bought it. Although both of them told a previous interviewer that neither had personal space of their own, during my visit Mrs. Yang said that "for sure" her husband has personal space. Mr. Yang not only was less willing to accept that the apartment had lost value, but he also disputed his wife's claim that he had personal space. He said, "I don't have enough space, and I still must share it when I am doing calligraphy. I really want my own space." When his wife asked him to compare the situation with their last rented place, however, he agreed that he did have space of his own. At the end of the visit, Mr. Yang volunteered, "My daughter will move out when she marries, so in any case I will be able to use that room exclusively for my calligraphy."

CONCLUSION

The economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping created the most sustained urban housing boom in Chinese history. By 1995 more than half of all residential units were less than sixteen years old (see table 10.2), and average per capita living space was more than twice that of 1979.⁴⁴ Shanghai followed these national trends. In the late 1970s most of Shanghai's 6 million urban residents lived in crowded apartments with few amenities. A majority shared bathrooms and kitchens with neighbors, and many used public latrines. Three-generation households were typical. Even married couples who lived independently of their

Table 10.2 Age of Urban Housing Stock by Units Built in Each Decade (%)

	pre-1949	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990-1995
National	7	4	6	16	46	20
Beijing	7	13	12	14	43	15
Shanghai	24	5	3	11	44	13
Tianjin	13	5	5	13	52	12

Source: 1995 *Quanguo renkou chouyang diaocha ziliao*, 630-32.

parents or in-laws rarely had the luxury of a private bedroom separate from their children. In the entire metropolis only five buildings exceeded twenty floors.⁴⁵

The changes made in this built environment after 1978 were mind-boggling. Between 1979 and 1989, 830,000 households occupied new or renovated apartments,⁴⁶ and between 1992 and 1996 another 800,000 moved.⁴⁷ More than 4.5 million people changed address, and average space per capita doubled, in most cases a move guaranteeing a higher material standard of living.⁴⁸ By the late 1990s the norm for new construction was a three-room apartment (*liangshi yiting*) with its own kitchen and bathroom looking out over a skyline punctuated with high-rise towers in diverse international styles.⁴⁹

Just as dramatic as the transformed physical conditions were the changes in popular expectations. One 1997 Xinhua article reported that 37.5 percent of city residents expected to buy an apartment through their unit and another 26 percent expected to buy on the market.⁵⁰ A 1998 Gallup poll in Chengdu, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai found that between 15 percent and 18 percent planned to buy a home within the next twelve months, and a follow-up survey in Guangzhou, Xi'an, and Wuhan indicated that 25 percent expected to purchase an apartment in 1999.⁵¹

New affluence and growing marketization of the urban economy have obliterated most communist certainties. In the prereform years, the claims of the collective trumped those of the individual and the public was always morally superior to the private. By the late 1990s, however, individual and personal preferences had gained a new legitimacy. Central to this cultural shift was the disappearance of the juxtaposition of proletariat and bourgeois that had structured everyday behavior for two decades. In the 1970s the ambitious as well as prudent person stood on the side of the proletariat not only in political discussions but even when selecting an appropriate hairstyle or ordering food at the market. Complaining in public about the lack of fresh fish could signal dangerous decadence.

Deng Xiaoping's decision to eschew class struggle and foster the hybrid of market socialism silenced the most vocal advocacy of proletariat fashion. Growing affluence and ever greater openness to the world beyond China even rehabilitated the previously odious lifestyle of the international bourgeoisie, but this

time in the more politically correct form of the modern middle classes. China remained a communist polity throughout the 1990s. But in the material culture of the late 1990s, particularly within the confines of newly privatized residential settings, socialist lifestyles have been replaced by a transnational, global reference group, which at first glance looks suspiciously "bourgeois." Declining proletarian style and rising home ownership have been accompanied by a strong male investment in the domestic sphere.

In 1987 I relied on interviews with women in their fifties and early sixties to understand one strand of urban popular culture. In the 1990s I interviewed a more diverse group of residents. Consequently, the greater emphasis on the husband's role may simply reflect the fact that I was not listening exclusively to older mothers seated in their bedrooms. But in 1998 and 1999 my Shanghai colleagues and I also spent over four hundred hours interviewing women, and a third of the interviews took place in the single room that was the bedroom, as well as living room, dining room, and study. Thus the strong imprint of male investments and the strong views of male respondents did not result from the stilling of women's voices but from changes in the property regime.

In the late 1990s city residents of all economic strata wanted to become property owners, and the official endorsements to strive ambitiously for personal success spilled over to legitimize a more general desire to strive for distinction. In this new political economy both men and women saw their homes as an important place where they could legitimately compete for social recognition. In the mid-1980s homes had also been an important social terrain, but they were rarely private property. Greater affluence, reduced state censorship, and the popularization of home ownership—as an ideal and a reality—altered the equation and increased the individual and societal significance of domestic investments.

The possibility of property ownership and the increased legitimacy for indulging personal comfort and displaying social distinctions refocused the energies of both men and women on domestic space. But when—as in contemporary China—husbands have higher earnings than wives and there is a long tradition of patrilineal inheritance, increased investments in urban residences are unlikely to be gender neutral or to favor women. We need only look at contemporary Taiwan to see how high capitalism accommodates exclusive male property claims. To some extent, as C. K. Yang wrote in 1959, collectivization and proletarian culture made unequal claims to family property moot. Under the conditions of collective ownership and criminalization of private business and investment, household headship carried little power outside the home and Chinese families could cede domestic space to women and avoid the difficult task of putting legal equality into practice. However, once market reforms recapitalized domestic property and individuals could openly compete for status through conspicuous consumption, male attachments and investments in domestic space intensified. Most typically in both advertisements and home visits I observed a domestic space configured around the interests of a married couple who relished

the opportunity to create a more comfortable and tasteful home for themselves and their single child. For these men and women, "my mother's house" of the 1980s had been succeeded by "a home of our own." But the greater impact of home ownership on male satisfaction and the higher percentage of male names on deeds suggest that conjugal property has a male tilt. Thus even as affluence and the single-child campaign have facilitated small nuclear households among urban families of all socioeconomic strata, privatization of real estate has strengthened male control over family property and thereby reversed the earlier tendency of collective ownership to neutralize traditional male advantages and feminize domestic space in Chinese cities.

NOTES

1. "A New Look at Housing," *China News Analysis*, October 1, 1998, 6.
2. *China Daily*, 7 January 1991, 1; *Beijing Review*, 17 January 1991; *Renmin ribao* (hereafter *RMRB*), 26 May 1991, 8; *RMRB* 1 January 1992, 2.
3. David Fraser, "Inventing Oasis," in Deborah Davis, ed., *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 25–53.
4. Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
5. "Women and Men in the Class Structure," in Rae Blumberg, ed., *Gender, Family, and the Economy* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1991), 60.
6. The literature on women's subordination within their families is vast. One of the most comprehensive recent discussion was presented by Martha Nussbaum in the Seeley Lectures in Political theory at the University of Chicago in February 1999.
7. Susan Mann, *Precious Records* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 75.
8. Deborah Davis, "My Mother's House," in *Unofficial China*, ed. Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz (Boulder: Westview, 1989), 88–100.
9. Eighty-four of the one hundred families had at least one married child, and of these fifty-five shared a home with the married child. In 80 percent of the three-generation homes, the coresident married child was a son.
10. C. K. Yang, *The Chinese Family in the Communist Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1959), 143.
11. Davis, "My Mother's House," p. 88.
12. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 129.
13. This is was the observation of Columbia University political scientist Xiaobo Lu at the Columbia modern China seminar in January 2000.
14. Personal communication, January 31, 2000.
15. *Xinmin wanbao* (hereafter *XMWB*), 4 June 1999, 35.
16. Deborah Davis, "Urban Households: Supplicants to a Socialist State," *Chinese Families in the Post Mao Era*, ed. Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 50–76.
17. Fraser, "Inventing Oasis: Luxury Housing Advertisements and Reconfiguring

Domestic Space in Shanghai," in *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, ed. Deborah Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 25–53.

18. This section draws on 35 brochures collected from 185 developers exhibiting in June 1999.

19. Kathleen Erwin, "Heart-to-Heart, Phone-to-Phone: Family Values, Sexuality, and the Politics of Shanghai's Advice Hotlines," in *Consumer Revolution*, 145–170.

20. Personal communication, February 10, 2000.

21. Advertisement for Yongde homes published in *Xinmin Wanbao*, 11 May 1994, 15.

22. When a colleague in Shanghai read this paper, he noted that this term could only be used for the taste of food and suggested that *pinwei* would be the better translation. In fact, I am simply quoting from the advertisement. The idea that it is the foodlike taste of the female that attracts the male customer confirms my argument about a "male tilt."

23. In 1998 we designed and implemented a longitudinal study of consumer behavior among four hundred couples in four cities to examine how the consumer revolution of the 1990s affected lifestyle among five occupational groups. In each city twenty-five families were randomly selected from residence committees in two to five different city districts from households headed by managers, professionals, blue-collar employees, or the self-employed. Over the year, each husband and wife was interviewed four times and in addition they twice filled out logs on one week's socializing activities. In this chapter I will use only the interview results from Shanghai. For financial support for the project, we thank the Henry Luce Foundation.

24. Interviewers asked each husband and wife during a separate interview: "Do you think every family must own the property rights of their own home? (*Nin renwei meijia dou yinggai yongyou ziji zhufang de chanquan ma?*) The options were yes (*shi*), no (*bu*), and hard to say (*buhaoshuo*).

25. Seven percent listed husband's father, 2 percent wife's father, 5 percent husband's mother, 2 percent wife's mother, 2.5 percent husband's brother, 3 percent wife's brother, 2 percent husband's sister, 3 percent wife's sister, 2 percent sons, and 1 percent a daughter.

26. Sixty-three percent of husbands but only 23 percent of wives said the title or rental agreement listed their name.

27. A similar pattern of consumer purchases is found in all large cities between 1986 and 1990. State Statistical Bureau and the East West Population Center, *Survey of Income and Expenditure of Urban Households in China in 1986* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 242–45; 1990 *Zhongguo chengzhen shumin jiating shouzhu diaocha ziliao* (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1991), 225–28, 293–95.

28. Zhang Tianzhi, ed., *Shanghai jiating shinei zhuanghuang jingxuan* (Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 1998), 3.

29. I heard this remark on Shanghai Education TV at 11 P.M. on 14 June 1999. The program featured a male decorator answering questions from a studio audience about how best to furnish a home. At the conclusion of this program, the shopping channel came on the air; the first product to be promoted was a heavy-duty cleaning liquid for kitchens.

30. One especially rich source is from the Web site of Rongxin Decorators, which advertised in the newspapers as well as on the Web at www.rxjtzh.online.sh.cn.

31. *Shanghai baijia zhuanghuang*, ed. Li Yang (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1996); *Shanghai xinzhao jiating zhuangshi* (Shanghai: Shanghai huabao chubanshe,

1996); *Xinbian Shanghai jiating buzhi yi baili* (Shanghai: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1995); *Shanghai jiating shinei zhuanghuang jingxuan*, ed. Zhang Tianzhi (Shanghai: Zhongguo fangzhi daxue chubanshe, 1999); *Shanghai jiating shinei zhuanghuang jingxuan*, ed. Zhang Tianzhi (Shanghai: Sanlian, 1998); *Shanghai jiating zhuanghuang yishu*, ed. Chen Xuwei and Chen Guohong (Shanghai: Zhongguo fangzhi daxue chubanshe, 1999). I purchased eight other magazines in the same stores between July 1997 and June 1999, but they were not published in Shanghai and thus are not reviewed here.

32. *Shanghai jiating shinei zhuanghuang jingxuan*, ed. Zhang Tianzhi (Shanghai: Zhongguo fangzhi daxue chubanshe, 1999), 5; *Shanghai jiating shinei zhuanghuang jingxuan*, ed. Zhang Tianzhi (Shanghai: Sanlian, 1998), 5.

33. Two friends who read this paper and whose families live in China remarked that before the reforms high-level cadre homes also tilted toward displaying men's status and achievements. One who had returned to attend the funeral of his grandmother noted that what struck him in his uncles' use of their homes was how the reforms has allowed them to "recapture their mother's house and turn it into a space for men's business."

34. *China Daily*, 7 January 1991, 1; *Beijing Review*, 17 January 1991; RMRB, 26 May 1991, 8; RMRB, 1 January 1992, 2.

35. Lau, Kwok-yu "Urban Housing Reform in China Amidst Property Boom" in Joseph Cheng and Lo Chi Kin, ed., *China Review 1993* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1994), 24:1–35, 16.

36. *Guowuyuan gongbao*, 1995, 70–73.

37. *Guowuyuan gongbao*, 1997, 810.

38. RMRB, 14 September 1995, 1; *China News Analysis*, 1 October 1998, 6.

39. One 1997 Xinhua article reported that 37.5 percent of city residents expected to buy an apartment through their unit and another 26 percent expected to buy on the market. see *China News Analysis*, 1 October 1998, 5. A 1998 Gallup poll in Chengdu, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai found that between 15 percent and 18 percent planned to buy a home within the next twelve months. See Matthew Miller, "City Dwellers Hungry for Durables," *South China Morning Post* (hereafter SCMP), 14 January 1999. A follow-up survey in Guangzhou, Xian, and Wuhan indicated that 25 percent expected to purchase an apartment in 1999. CCTV, 7:30 P.M., June 21, 1999, as viewed in Shanghai.

40. Only 9 percent of husbands and 4 percent of wives answered in the negative to the following question: "Do you think every family must have ownership of their own dwelling? (*nin renwei meijia dou yinggai yongyou ziji zhufang de chanquan ma?*). When we compared the size, amenities, and number of rooms among families headed by each occupational category, owners did better. For example, among blue-collar men, owners averaged 2 rooms, renters 1.6; among professionals, owners averaged 3.0 room, renters, 2.1. Among managers owners averaged 2.5 rooms, renters 2.1. Similarly, among twenty-six owners, all but one had a private toilet while among the fifty-nine renters 34 percent shared a toilet with at least one other household.

41. Among men only 7 percent of renters but 24 percent of owners said they were very satisfied. Among women the gap was 9 percent versus 25 percent. Using a five-point scale, male differences were significant at a 0.07 level.

42. Among men, 13 percent of renters but 42 percent of owners said they had private space, among women 11 percent of renters and 31 percent of owners. Thus ownership significantly raised the likelihood, but the gain for men was greater.

43. Among owners, the percentage of men who said they were a legal leaseholder was 69 percent as opposed to 60 percent among renters. For women, ownership also raised the number claiming to be leaseholders from 21 percent among renters to 27 percent among owners, but women remained in a clear minority.

44. In 1979 it was 3.6 square meters; in 1995, 8.1 square meters. *Zhongguo tongji nianjian* 1999, 317.

45. *Shanghai tongji nianjian* 1998 (Shenzhen: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1998), 102. Hereafter SHTJNJ.

46. *Beijing Review*, 14 January 1991, 7.

47. XMWB, 24 August 1997, 1.

48. Between 1978 and 1998, the average square meters per resident rose from 4.5 to almost 10. SHTJNJ 1999, 85. By 1997 a majority of urban households (70 percent) had self-contained apartments with their own kitchen, bathroom, and private entrance (XMWB, 29 January 1999, 35).

49. By 1997 there were 861 buildings with between 20 and 29 floors, and 105 of more than 30. SHTJNJ 1998, 102.

50. *China News Analysis*, 1 October 1998, 5.

51. Matthew Miller, "City Dwellers Hungry for Durables," SCMP, 14 January 1999; CCTV 7:30 P.M., June 21, 1999, as viewed in Shanghai.