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Writing the Longtang Way of Life

Scheen, L.M.

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Writing the *longtang* way of life



‘Looked down upon from the highest point in the city, Shanghai’s *longtang* – her vast neighborhoods inside enclosed alleys – are a magnificent sight.’ Thus opens the award-winning novel *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* by the influential writer Wang Anyi. In this novel, Shanghai’s alleyway houses are brought to life by meticulous descriptions that seem to anthropomorphise the city. A unique housing typology, the experience of its residents and Shanghai history, all made one through the literary imagination.

Lena Scheen

EVERY SHANGHAISE WILL PROUDLY TELL YOU that if you haven’t been to the Bund, you haven’t been to Shanghai. It is indeed a unique site: imposing buildings from the treaty-port period (1841-1943) facing the futuristic skyline of ultramodern Pudong across the Huangpu River. The local significance of the Bund reveals the citizens’ paradoxical rejoicing in Shanghai’s new global image and, simultaneously, their growing sense of nostalgia for the city’s past. In particular the first half of the 20th century has become a favourite subject in ‘high’ as well as popular culture; a time when the cosmopolitan metropolis was world-famous as a financial and cultural centre, known by such colourful nicknames as ‘Pearl of the Orient’, ‘Whore of Asia’, ‘Paris of the East’, or ‘Paradise for Adventurers’.

The collective infatuation with colonial Shanghai – referred to as ‘Shanghai nostalgia’ in Chinese cultural discourse – sprang up in the mid-1990s when the city witnessed an explosion of destruction and renewal. Searching for a Shanghai identity in the midst of brutal transformation, Shanghai writers resorted, en masse, to this distinctive period in Chinese history. After being presented as the epitome of evil in the Maoist period, colonial Shanghai now reconquered its original representation of Western-style urban modernity. The typical Shanghai *longtang* – built in the colonial period and characterised by a unique mixture of Chinese and Western architecture –

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has become one of the main symbols, featuring recurrently in contemporary Shanghai fiction, of which *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is one of the most representative examples.

Song of Everlasting Sorrow

Wang Anyi’s novel borrows its title from a narrative poem by Bai Juyi (CE 772-846) about the tragic love story between Tang emperor Xuanzong and his most beautiful concubine Yang Guifei. Being madly in love, the emperor neglects his state affairs until he has to flee because of an armed rebellion. His royal guards blame Yang Guifei and force the emperor to have her executed. The poem closes with Xuanzong’s lamenting words: ‘While even heaven and earth will one day come to an end, this everlasting sorrow shall endure.’

The novel *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* also ends in the murder of a tragic beauty, the ageing Qiyao whose life reflects Shanghai’s turbulent history. As though she is just one of the diverse elements that constitute a *longtang* neighbourhood, Wang Anyi only introduces Qiyao after four chapters of detailed description of the *longtang* setting. She embodies the ‘girlish *longtang* spirit’:

Behind every doorway in the Shanghai longtang a Wang Qiyao is studying, embroidering, whispering secrets to her sisters, or throwing a teary-eyed tantrum at her parents.

Through Wang Anyi’s words, the protagonist of the novel seems to become the *longtang* itself, or, in the words of the Chinese journal *Writer*: ‘the city’s alleys, the city’s atmosphere, the city’s thought and spirit.’

While the timeframe of the three parts of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* corresponds to the political periods of pre-Mao, Mao, and post-Mao China, it is not a historical novel in the strict sense. History and politics play their part behind the scenes, leaving their traces in Wang Qiyao’s life story. But what is most striking about the novel is how historical events are mirrored in the changing physical appearance of the *longtang*, that originated in the glorious days of cosmopolitan Shanghai:

First to appear are the dormer windows protruding from a rooftop tingzjian [the garret above the kitchen in longtang, this often rented out to struggling young writers and lent its name to a popular literary genre as a result] of those traditional longtang buildings, showing themselves off with a certain self-conscious delicacy; the wooden shutters are carefully delineated, the handmade rooftop tiles are arranged with precision, even the potted roses on the windowsills have been cared for painstakingly.

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This is the décor against which Wang Qiyao’s story begins in 1946, when she is 16 years old, reaching third place in a Miss Shanghai contest. Leading a glamorous life as a model and mistress of Kuomintang officer Li, Qiyao is able to escape her humble background. Her charmed life ends with Li getting killed in a plane crash and Qiyao being left with only a small box of his gold bars.

The second part of the novel, set in the Mao period (1949-1976), finds Qiyao making ends meet as the neighbourhood nurse. *Longtang* life runs its normal course, seemingly untouched by the political upheaval surrounding it: neighbours and friends meet in Qiyao’s home, eating, drinking, chatting, gossiping, playing mahjong, and having afternoon tea. Since this kind of ‘decadent bourgeois’ life was basically impossible during the Mao period, one could almost forget this part of the novel is no longer set in colonial Shanghai. In this way, the *longtang* can be seen as a place of refuge and a space of apolitical resistance.

All this abruptly ends in 1966, when Qiyao’s then lover commits suicide by throwing himself out of a window. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) is largely omitted, which is rather striking for a work that deals with 40 years of Shanghai history – Shanghai is the city where the Cultural Revolution was instigated and experienced its peak. People were restricted in their private lives and many residents were sent to the countryside. It is again through the depiction of the *longtang* that one can painfully sense the atmosphere of overall devastation:

Longtang alleys of all shapes and sizes ran all over the city, and it was during the summer of 1966 that the red- and black-tiled rooftops riddled with protruding dormer windows and concrete terraces were all pried open suddenly, their secrets, conciliatory or compromising, damp and moldy, reeking of rat piss, were in the process of rotting away [...]

In the final part of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* Shanghai embraces the market economy model. Wang Qiyao has more difficulties in adapting than her illegitimate daughter. As a former Miss Shanghai, Qiyao becomes a symbol of the colonial period and attracts a young boy who idolises her because of this. However, he soon realises that his beloved old city and Qiyao are both fading irrevocably away.

The novel ends with Wang Qiyao’s violent death: she is murdered for the one possession that she nostalgically used to keep the past alive – Li’s gold bars, symbols of old Shanghai.

The Shanghai longtang have grown gray; there are cracks in the streets and along the walls, the alley lamps have been smashed by mischievous children, the gutters are clogged, and foul water trickles down the streets. Even the leaves of the sweet-scented oleanders are coated with grime.

By depicting the daily lives and ‘trivial’ experiences of ordinary people in the cramped spaces of *longtang* neighborhoods, Wang Anyi reveals the untold stories of the city, or what Zhang Xudong calls ‘the natural history’ – unofficial histories, intimate life-worlds, and memories – of the city beneath ‘a mechanical, homogeneous history.’ The *longtang* seem to embody the soul or essence of Shanghai culture that has survived in spite of a brutal history, but is now about to vanish:

Amid the forest of new skyscrapers, these old longtang neighborhoods are like a fleet of sunken ships, their battled hulls exposed as the sea dries up.

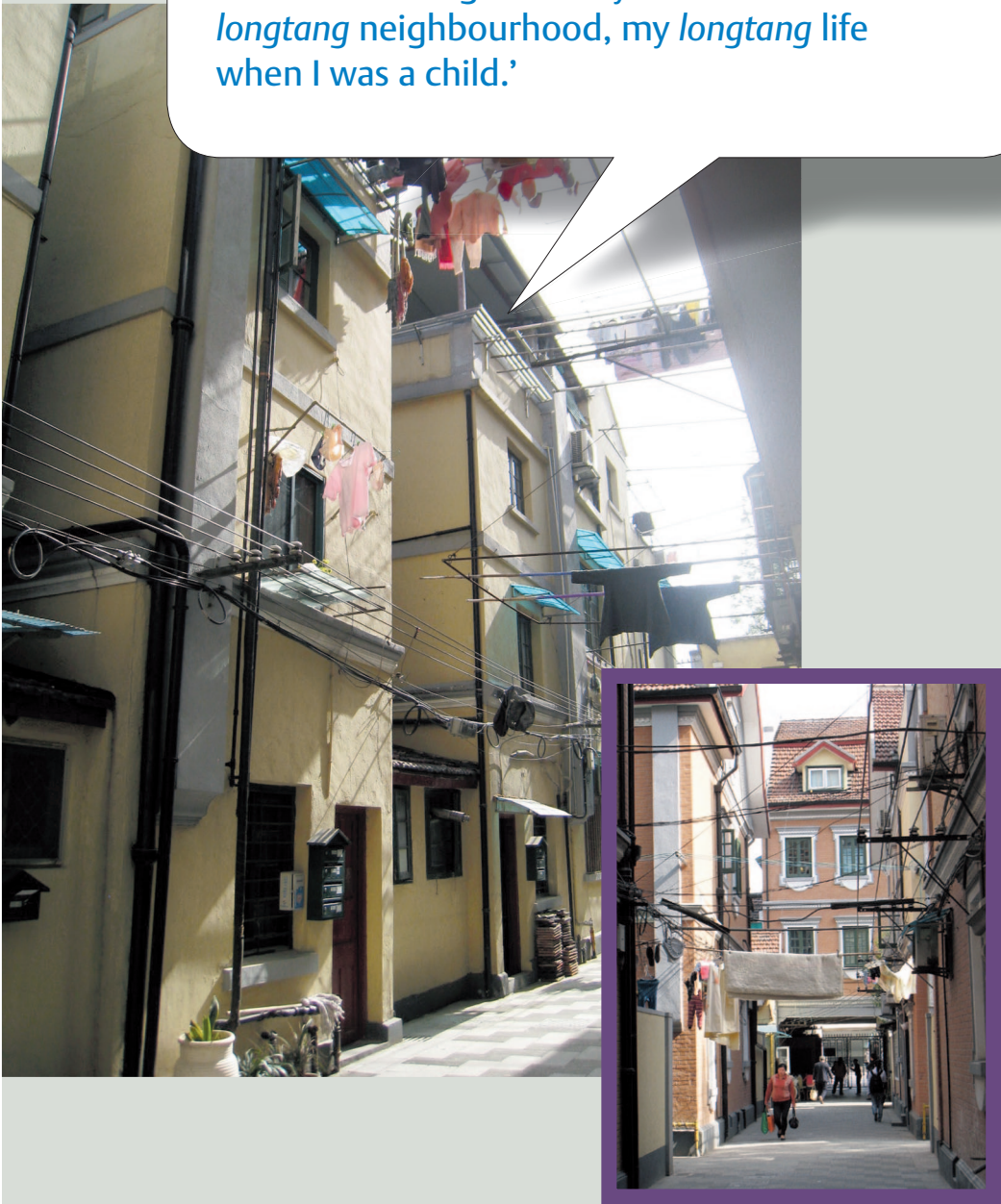
What the narrator mourns, seeing the decay of Shanghai’s *longtang*, is not so much its unique architecture but the Shanghai lifestyle that the typology of these houses made possible. In an interview, Wang Anyi illustrated this poignantly with the following personal story:

One day I was heading for an appointment, but couldn’t find the place. I suddenly noticed that I had unconsciously entered a typical Shanghai longtang neighbourhood. As I walked on, a deeply familiar feeling overwhelmed me. It was a particular smell, but also a particular sound, a particular temperature... Tears came to my eyes, because these sensations embodied a life that I recognised: my childhood in the longtang neighbourhood, my longtang life when I was a child.

To conclude in Wang Anyi’s own words, ‘You could say a *longtang* is a certain type of architecture, but what it actually is, is a way of life.’

Lena Scheen
Leiden University, The Netherlands
lena.scheen@gmail.com

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