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Scheen, L.M.

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PREFACE

THE CITY OF FEELING RISING OUT OF THE CITY OF FACT

This is a city which has witnessed significant historical transformations and is permeated with stories and meaning, like an old man who has experienced the vicissitudes of life. With fictional and non-fictional writings, I attempt to record the experiences of people here and their life stories, to depict what might be one of the earliest globalized cities in the world, which was once named a city of cosmopolitanism.

Chen Danyan 陈丹燕 (2004; original in English)

There is a popular story in Shanghai saying that when a Chinese delegation visited Berlin in 1997, the then mayor of Berlin boasted about the scale and speed of Berlin's construction work. Li Ruihuan 李瑞环, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), responded that in Shanghai it went probably 20 or 25 times faster, after which the mayor corrected himself saying that Shanghai was the number one construction site in the world. "The mayor's words evoked a burst of hearty laughter."¹

Chairman Li's words were no exaggeration. Ever since Shanghai's Pudong area became one of China's Special Economic Zones 经济特区 (SEZ) in April 1990, a huge transformation has swept across the entire city, turning it into a landscape of dusty trenches, towering cranes and skeletons of skyscrapers. Night and day one can hear the sound of construction workers and machines demolishing old buildings and building new ones. Nine years after the Chinese delegation visited Berlin, Howard W. French writes in the *International Herald Tribune* (6 April 2006):

The reason you must come to Shanghai now, if cities remotely interest you, is that the work here not only constitutes one of the world's great urban transformations, it also involves one of history's great disappearing acts. An old city of organic communities, with intimate, walk-up buildings and extraordinarily rich street life, is being replaced, almost in the blink of an eye, by a new city of expensive high-rises, underground parking garages, and lifestyles based on sheltered, closed-door individualism.

As French points out, large scale urban renewal not only transforms the physical appearance of our built environment, it also transforms the way we live in this environment, with profound effects on citizens' daily and inner lives. Families are relocated to high-rise buildings in the outskirts of town, far away from stores or

¹ See (among others): <http://houston.china-consulate.org> → 新闻观点.

schools, where they experience multifaceted trauma, such as an ever-increasing disintegration of traditional social order and an end to Maoist social security. In short, one could define Shanghai's transformation as a manifestation of modernity as described by Marshall Berman (1982: 6): a condition where "all that is solid melts into air," and where people have to "struggle to make themselves at home in a constantly changing world."

This study is driven by my fascination with Shanghai's dazzling urban transformation and the premise that Hou Hanru 侯瀚如 (2006) is right when he asserts:

Shanghai as the centre of urban metamorphoses in the 1990s is of course the very central space in which the city inhabitants, for the sake of survival, have to renegotiate the relationship with their constantly shifting urban environment [...] and artists are among the most sensitive to the effects [of] all these brutal changes.

Indeed, Shanghai has shown a variety of artistic responses to what is arguably a process of overall disruption in both individual and collective experience. In this study, I will discuss novels, literary essays, and short stories that offer articulate representations of contemporary Shanghai, with the city in the midst of transformation as significant background, and as a protagonist in its own right.

In Search of Shanghai

I once wrote in the opening of a novel: "We can never find out the history of the city we live in." As a matter of fact, it is really hard to investigate. This place is too closely connected to reality; its character is fused with our daily life, it is so real to us that any theoretical concept becomes empty. I truly find it hard to describe this place where I live, Shanghai. All my impressions of this city are meshed in the weeds of my private life and therefore they carry an almost secret meaning.

Wang Anyi 王安忆 (2001: 1)

As Wang Anyi explains in the opening of her literary essays collection *In Search of Shanghai*, the Shanghai in its title is not an object of factual, historical study; it is an object of experience, an "image of the city" (Lynch 1960) in the mind of its narrator, or, as Willa Cather (1976: 24; original 1935) writes in her novel *Lucy Gayheart*, a "city of feeling":

Lucy carried in her mind a very individual map of Chicago: a blur of smoke and wind and noise, with flashes of blue water, and certain clear outlines rising from the confusion; a high building on Michigan Avenue where Sebastian had his studio – the stretch of park where he sometimes walked in the afternoon – the

Cathedral door out of which she had seen him come one morning – the concert hall where she first heard him sing. This city of feeling rose out of the city of fact like a definite composition, – beautiful because the rest was blotted out.

It is precisely this “city of feeling [rising] out of the city of fact” that is the subject matter of this study. How is the city-of-feeling Shanghai imagined in contemporary Chinese fiction?

The corpus of this study is a selection of literary works published between 1998 and 2006, when urban transformation experienced its peak in Shanghai. I will examine how these works express the impact of Shanghai’s urban transformation on its citizens. This interaction of the changing city of fact and literary imaginings of citizens’ experiences of the changing city of feeling reveals how the real and the imagined Shanghai transform each other in a multidimensional discursive praxis that is relevant to contemporary Chinese culture at large.

This study is written from an interdisciplinary approach, embedding regional specialization (China studies) in a disciplinary framework (urban studies and literary studies) to explore the richness and diversity of literary imaginings of Shanghai’s turbulent urban experience. My textual analysis employs close-reading strategies and draws on theories on the representation of the (post-)modern city in literature. As for urban studies, this study is informed by those theorists who focus on urban experience, the image of the city, and the effect of the city on its inhabitants’ identity. During fieldwork in Shanghai, I spoke with readers, editors, publishers, critics, and a majority of the authors discussed in this study to explore beyond the written record the domestic reception of the texts under scrutiny and their impact on the cultural field, and broader issues relating to Shanghai and the literary field.²

After an introductory chapter on Shanghai, subsequent chapters are informed by four prevailing thematic responses to the experience of transforming Shanghai across my selection of texts: mappings (drawing mental maps of memories), seduction (reproducing the city as *femme fatale*), nostalgia (restoring old buildings to rewrite the past), and escape (out of and into various places ‘real’ and imagined). In view of the thematic structure of this study and the variety of its corpus, each chapter draws on a theoretical framework that seems particularly relevant to the theme in question and the works under discussion.

Since no literary text is immune to influences of the culture to which it belongs, the first chapter (Context) will provide an impression of a literary tradition from which the works under discussion originated, i.e. the history of the modern literary field in Shanghai and an overview of influential Chinese novels with a Shanghai setting.

² The Chinese scholars and authors I (informally) interviewed are: Cai Xiang, Chen Cun 陈村, Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, Cheng Xiaoying 程小莹, Ding Liying 丁丽英, Jia Yanyan 贾艳艳, Jin Haishu 金海曙, Jin Yucheng 金字澄, Kong Mingzhu 孔明珠, Mian Mian 棉棉, Wang Anyi, Wang Jin 王进, Wang Xiaoming 王晓明, Weihui 卫慧, Yin Huifen 殷慧芬, Yuan Jin 袁进, and Zhang Min 张曼.

The second chapter (Mappings) discusses a collection of short stories by local novelists about places in Shanghai that hold special meaning for them, which together are meant to form a ‘three-dimensional map’ of Shanghai. The methodology for this chapter is inspired by literary critic Franco Moretti (1998 & 2007) and his theory of the literary map, and by urban sociologist Kevin Lynch (1960) and his theory of the image of the city or mental map. By drawing literary maps as analytical tools, I will show which parts of Shanghai predominantly feature in the stories, and then explore if the maps reveal any salient patterns. Also, I will compare the readings of the stories under discussion by the Shanghai-based scholars Cai Xiang 蔡翔 and Chen Huifen 陈惠芬.

The third chapter (Seduction) is based on Richard Lehan’s (1986: 99) assumption that “the literary text codifies ideas and attitudes about the city and that as the city itself changes under historical influence, so do these codes.” I will discuss how the 1920-30s trope of the city as *femme fatale* revives in 1990s literature, but with new annotations since it is now female authors who have adopted the trope. I will also build on the works of Guy Debord (1994) and Jean Baudrillard (2001) to show how Shanghai is portrayed as the society of the spectacle, a society where capital accumulates to the point that it becomes images.

The fourth chapter (Nostalgia) is written from the perspective of Carlo Rotella’s (1998) argument that not only urban fiction is influenced by the physical, social, and political aspects of the city it depicts, but that the material city itself is also a product of imaginative processes. This chapter shows how the preservation of Shanghai’s colonially influenced buildings is in fact inspired by the citizens’ nostalgic collective memory of Shanghai as Treaty Port (1842-1946), and how literary texts in which these buildings feature as prominent literary settings not only reflect this nostalgia, but also play a role in transmitting and reinforcing the sentiment. This chapter is also inspired by the works of Ackbar Abbas (1997, 2000 & 2002) on preservation in Shanghai and his observation that Shanghai’s history is insistently placed in a “triple historical framework”: as Treaty Port, under communism, and contemporary Shanghai.

In the final chapter (Escape), I will focus on the mental impact on Shanghai’s residents of the city’s transformation as an overwhelming, pressurizing force. This chapter draws in particular on studies on modernity and the social and mental effects of urban life by sociologists Georg Simmel (1903) and Richard Sennett (1977). In the works under discussion, the protagonists feel lost and confused in the rapidly changing city and respond by an inner desire or need to escape from daily life in the outside world. I will show how their escape always remains within the city’s confines, revealing that in the characters’ consciousness there is no other environment than the urban.

Starting from the idea that the changing city-of-fact Shanghai triggers literary imaginings of the city-of-feeling Shanghai, I offer a brief overview of the history of Shanghai and its recent urban transformation before delving into its literary imaginings.