4

NOSTALGIA

RESTORING OLD BUILDINGS TO REWRITE THE PAST

Figure 4-1 First Row: Wang Anyi’s The Song of Everlasting Sorrow & Chen Danyan’s Shanghai Trilogy and “Black-and-White Mosaic”. Second Row: Nostalgic Novels by Shu Cai, Yu Tianbai, Cheng Naishan, and Shen Jialu.

Taking a boat on the Huangpu River and looking into the distance at the brilliant lights on both sides, I feel full of pride. Granite buildings line up on the old Bund at Puxi one after another, always proudly demonstrating the beauty of European classic architecture; yet, decorated by modern and colorful lightning, the massive buildings do not seem overbearing. Lights at the Bund can talk, narrating history of Shanghai. There are new and uniquely-shaped buildings of all styles at the riverfront of Pudong, competing to project splendid lights to the starry sky. They indeed outshine the stars in the universe. Lights at the riverfront of Pudong can sing, singing in a loud or a low voice for Shanghai’s new look.

Cao Yang 曹阳 (2006: 244; translation by Sylvia Yu and Julian Chen)

Only one cityscape in China really works. When you stand on the Bund, in Shanghai, you have a sweep of well-restored colonial palaces floodlit behind you, and in front of you, across the Huangpu river, the winking fairy spires of 21st century Pudong. It’s a genuinely rapturous sight, though you can’t help thinking that there is nothing very Chinese about it.

Christopher Lockwood (cited in Jansson and Lagerkvist 2009: 34)
Every Shanghainese will proudly tell you that if you haven’t been to the Bund, you haven’t been to Shanghai. Along this boulevard, beautifully preserved Art Deco and neoclassical buildings have been regarded as symbols of Shanghai for over a hundred years. Since the 1990s the symbol of Shanghai has become the so-called New Bund referring to both sides of the Huangpu River: the historic colonial side on the west bank and the futuristic skyscrapers of the Pudong area on the east bank.\footnote{Located at the banks of the Huangpu River between Waibaidu Bridge and Nanpu Bridge, the New Bund has a total length of 4 kilometres. It rests against the Huangpu River on the east and a row of 52 unique buildings integrating the Oriental and Occidental architectural styles on the west, generally known as ‘buildings in multinational styles of architecture,’ which, for over a century, has remained a symbol of Shanghai. At night when the floodlights of the buildings are switched on at the same time, the buildings look exactly like crystal palaces, which, set off by the Oriental Pearl Radio and Television Tower on the east bank of the Huangpu River, are even more brilliant and dazzling” (http://lyw.sh.gov.cn/en \rarr Scenic Spot \rarr New Bund).} As Huang ([Michelle] 2004: 119) writes:

> The mirror image, presented by the global-city campaign for its onlookers to identify with, is Janus-faced, one side advertising the ultramodern skyline in Pudong, and the other the historical Shanghai as a big city with bright lights and urban legends of all kinds.

The local significance of the New Bund reveals the citizens’ rejoicing in Shanghai’s new global image and, simultaneously, their growing sense of nostalgia for the city’s past. In particular Shanghai’s semi-colonial period as Treaty Port (1842-1943) has become a favorite subject in ‘high’ as well as popular culture. After being presented as the epitome of evil whose traces should be erased, the period now re-conquers its original representation of urban modernity and serves as a prefiguration of the global city Shanghai aspires to be.\footnote{Cf. Palmer 2007: 200: “Nostalgia for the history of Shanghai as an international center with a specifically local culture is mobilized here not for the sake of remembrance but for the purpose of providing a local, historical precedent for cosmopolitan consumption.” And Pan (2002): “Colonial Shanghai, depicted in the imaginative world of historical accounts, scholarly papers, novels, and on countless websites, symbolized Chinese nation’s first quest for modernity through industrialization and urbanization.”} By linking the 1990s to the years before 1949, Shanghai seems to want to erase a good forty years of insularity and communalism by “fully embracing its cosmopolitan, semicolonial past as the breeding ground for China’s earliest urban modernity and launching pad for its global future,” in the words of Visser (2010a: 176).

Along with historians, literary writers have started to rewrite the colonial history of Shanghai.\footnote{After Mao’s death, the Municipal Government made the renovated Shanghai Archives, which houses an enormous amount of historical data from pre-1949 files, publicly accessible.} One only has to enter one of the many bookstores to find special sections with several bookcases full of Shanghai’s history, of which a majority is exclusively about the 1930s, on subjects varying from coffee culture and fashion to jazz; some deal with a larger part of the city’s history. In the fiction department the shelves are filled with a wide range of reprinted 1930s literature, from the New
Perceptionists to Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction, along with contemporary novels with a historic setting. All of these books are part of a larger trend referred to as ‘Shanghai nostalgia’ 上海怀旧 in Chinese cultural discourse. In this chapter, I will focus on the works of two female authors who are commonly regarded as representative of this trend: Chen Danyan (b. 1958) and Wang Anyi (b. 1954).\(^\text{115}\)

As the covers of the works under discussion strikingly reveal (see figure 4-1), the history of Shanghai is narrated through two main subjects: Shanghai women and Shanghai buildings. Since the first topic is discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter will focus on the latter, i.e. literary imaginings of Shanghai’s old buildings in relation to Shanghai nostalgia. Built in the semi-colonial period and characterized by their European-style architecture, these buildings form an essential part of Shanghai’s colonial legacy and, what Ackbar Abbas (2002: 42) names the city’s “own brand of cosmopolitan urban culture”:

By the 1920s and 1930s you could see it at once in the Tudor-style villas, Spanish-style townhouses, Russian-style churches, the German-style mansions, together with the internationalism of the buildings on the Bund and, of course, the Shanghainese lanehouses or lilong [里弄; also known as longtang 弄堂, nongtang, and, in English, ‘alleyway housing’]\(^\text{116}\) housing complexes.

A remarkable number of these buildings survived the Mao era, only to come under threat with the city’s major urban renewal scheme. After large-scale demolition in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Shanghai government suddenly turned towards a policy of selective preservation and restoration, for reasons discussed below.

Likewise, Shanghai writers show an increasing interest in Shanghai’s colonial architecture. In the case of Wang Anyi and Chen Danyan, these buildings recurrently feature as a literary setting in their fiction and as subject matter in their literary essays. Regardless of the era in which their works are set, the buildings are nostalgically brought to life by meticulous descriptions that almost turn them into protagonists. This raises interesting questions: Does the nostalgic portrayal of these colonial-built houses and public buildings imply a rejection of present-day urban transformation? Or conversely, is this yet another form of resurrecting “the glory of Old Shanghai” as “a leitmotif in the urban discourse of Shanghai’s global spatialization,” as Huang ([Michelle] 2004: 119) lucidly explains Shanghai nostalgia? And is it therefore also an attempt to efface the memory of Mao-era Shanghai? Finally, does it imply an uncritical stance towards the city’s colonial history?

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\(^{115}\) Authors whose works have been labeled ‘Shanghai nostalgia,’ include: Bi Feiyu 毕飞宇 (b.1964), Cheng Naishan (b.1946), Kong Mingzhu (b. 1954), Su Su 素素 (b.1972), Tang Ying (b. 1955), and Yu Tianbai (b. 1937).

\(^{116}\) I prefer to use the term ‘longtang’ [pronounced by the Shanghainese as ‘nongtang’] in this chapter, because this is the word mostly used in the stories and essays of Chen Danyan and Wang Anyi.
First, I will introduce the authors Chen Danyan and Wang Anyi. Considering the enormous amount of studies on nostalgia in general, and Shanghai nostalgia in particular (in Chinese and in other languages), I will give a modest overview of some of the main points made on this issue, with special emphasis on architectural preservation. Then I will discuss the role of the longtang houses in Wang Anyi’s novel The Song of Everlasting Sorrow (2001), and show how the protagonist’s personal experiences and the city’s history are mirrored in the changing physical appearance of the longtang.\textsuperscript{117} After that, I will explore imaginings of Western-style apartments and a British bank building, in Chen Danyan’s literary essay collection Shanghai Memorabilia (1998) and the short story “Black-and-White Mosaic” 黑白马赛克 (2006), before offering some concluding remarks.\textsuperscript{118}

\section*{WANG ANYI AND CHEN DANYAN: LIFE AND WORKS}

\subsection*{Wang Anyi}
Wang Anyi was born in Nanjing in 1954. One year later she moved to Shanghai with her mother Ru Zhijuan, a famous writer from Shanghai. In 1970, during the Cultural Revolution, Wang was sent to the Anhui countryside for “re-education by the peasants.” In 1972, she joined a local performing arts troupe as a cellist, and in the mid-1970s she started publishing short stories. In 1978, Wang returned to Shanghai to work for the magazine \textit{Childhood} 儿童时代. In 1980 she became a member of the Chinese Writers’ Association, and in 2001 Wang was elected chairperson of the Shanghai Writers’ Association.

Wang’s early works deal with her experiences during the Cultural Revolution, with a particular emphasis on its effects on women. In her well-known “Love Trilogy” (Brocade Valley 锦缎谷之恋 (1987), Love in a Small Town 小城之恋 (1988), Love on a Barren Mountain 荒山之恋 (1988)), Wang explored feminine subjectivity and sexuality, which caused a lot of controversy. Her award-winning Baotown 小鲍庄 (1989) is part of the Root-Seeking Literature, and explores traditional Chinese values still present in the countryside.

In the 1990s, Wang started writing more urban fiction, always with a Shanghai setting, of which \textit{The Song of Everlasting Sorrow} is the best-known example. The novel was first published in journal Zhongshan 钟山 (1995-1,2,3,4). It won, among others, the Fifth Mao Dun Literature Award 矛盾文学奖 (2000) and was listed at the very top of the Ten Most Influential Books of the 1990s 九十年代最有影响力的中国作品 (2000) (Shijie ribao 世界日报, 1 October 2000). Riding the wave of Shanghai nostalgia, the novel has been adapted in various forms of popular culture:

\textsuperscript{117} For the research of this chapter, I used Wang Anyi 2003. All quotations come from the excellent translation (2008) by Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan.

\textsuperscript{118} For the research of this chapter, I used Chen Danyan 2001 and 2006.
from film (directed by Stanley Kwan 关锦鹏), television miniseries (directed by Ding Hei 丁黑), stage play (written by Zhao Yaomin 赵耀民 and directed by Su Leci 苏乐慈), teleplay novelization (by Jiang Liping 蒋丽萍), audio books (by Tian Hongtao 田洪涛), to even an illustrated teleplay novelization (illustrated by Weng Ziyang 翁子杨).

Wang Anyi also published many essay collections on the city of Shanghai. One example is In Search of Shanghai 寻找上海 (2001), which covers Shanghai’s earliest history until the present day. Each chapter provides the reader with plenty of informative and interesting facts and pictures about the city, but In Search of Shanghai is read most profitably as an autobiographical account of the way Wang Anyi experienced her city as a child and as an adult.

Chen Danyan
Chen Danyan was born in Beijing in 1958, and moved to Shanghai with her family at the age of eight. From 1978 to 1982, she studied Chinese Literature at the East China Normal University. After completing her degree she worked as a reporter for the same magazine as Wang Anyi, Childhood. Chen became famous for her children’s books, but later switched to literature for adults. Her novel Girls 少女们 (1987) won the UNESCO Prize for Peace. It is an autobiographical novel about her experiences during the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai in 1966. Her novel Death of a Schoolgirl 女中学生之死 (1991) was chosen as one of the world’s one hundred best children’s books by the Japanese Association for Children’s Literature in 1991.

Chen Danyan’s books on Shanghai have made her one of the best-selling authors in China since the late 1990s, and generated many debates in newspapers and on national television. Her Shanghai Trilogy contained the essay collection Shanghai Memorabilia 上海 (1998), and the two biographies Shanghai Princess (1999) and Shanghai Beauty (2000). Shanghai Princess has been translated into English and is based on interviews Chen Danyan held with Daisy (戴西) Kwok Bew (郭婉莹), an Australian-Chinese daughter of the director of the Wing On 永安 department store, and Shanghai Beauty is about Yao Yao 姚姚, the daughter of the famous movie star Shangguan Yunzhu 上官云珠 (1920-1968).

In anticipation of the Shanghai World Expo 2010, a second trilogy was published, under the title Shanghai, My City 上海我的城 and including a new edition of Shanghai Memorabilia, the collection Images and Legends of the Bund (2008), and a collection of ‘impressions and records’ (影像、记录), titled Public Parks (2009). Chen Danyan has called the series her archaeological fantasies, which collectively can be read as an enormous biography of Shanghai.
SHANGHAI NOSTALGIA: A CULTURE OF REAPPEARANCE

Chapter Four

Shanghai is a very modernized city now. But there are times when I feel depressed when I come across people and architecture that have become less and less refined. The city used to move me in a lot of ways, but nowadays, a sense of hollowness takes over me instead. I hear people talking about hooking up the track [this could be a translation of 接轨 ‘connecting the track’, a popular metaphor for China’s integration into the international economy], to reconnect the historical flow of the present with the 1950s or even the 1930s, erasing the cultural void that occurred in between. Yet, I tend to believe that a void in history is irreparable and virtues that are lost are regrettably lost.

Stanley Kwan, director of Everlasting Regret, the movie adaptation of Wang Anyi’s The Song of Everlasting Sorrow (www.everlasting-regret.com → director → interview)

The term nostalgia derives from the Greek nóstos, ‘return home,’ and álgos, ‘pain,’ as a compound word meaning, ‘a painful yearning to return home.’ The term was first used in the seventeenth century, to designate a condition of extreme homesickness among Swiss mercenaries fighting far from their native land. Later, however, the meaning of nostalgia shifted its focus of reference from place to time, and it was used in a broader sense of a collective melancholic, sentimental yearning for the past, rather than a medical illness or an individual desire to return home.

The contemporary meaning of nostalgia is actually very close to the Chinese word for nostalgia: 怀旧 (huaijiao), a compound word consisting of the word 怀 in its meaning of ‘think of’ or ‘yearn for’ and the word 旧 in its meaning of ‘old’ or ‘the past’: meaning ‘to yearn for the past.’ Shanghai nostalgia carries a clear reference to both place and time, and is a form of ‘collective nostalgia,’ as defined by Fred Davis (1979: 122):

Collective nostalgia refers to that condition in which the symbolic objects are of a highly public, widely shared and familiar character, i.e. those symbolic resources from the past which can under proper conditions trigger off wave upon wave of nostalgic feeling in millions of persons at the same time.

The symbolic objects that triggered a wave of nostalgia in millions of Shanghainese are mainly objects associated with ‘1930s Shanghai,’ varying from the qipao or cheongsam, a close-fitting woman’s dress, with high neck and slit skirt that was

119 Lu ([Sheldon] 1999: 392n83) writes: “The term [接轨] first surfaced in the 1990s, meaning to keep abreast of advanced economic and technological systems abroad […] Later it also meant that the skyrocketing inflation had made many commodities as expensive as they were abroad. And, finally, particularly to the older generation, the ‘track’ has been ‘connected’ to the city’s controversial past.”

120 One of the Chinese words for homesick, 怀 (‘huaixiang’), also derives from the same origin as the word for nostalgia, with 怀 meaning ‘yearning for’ and 乡 meaning ‘native place.’
Nostalgia

popular at the time, to calendar posters, jazz music, coffee, and commercial advertisements.\footnote{121}

In a society of rapid and drastic change, nostalgia – or ‘corrupted memories’ as Fredric Jameson (1991: 21) names it – for a past period is a common reaction in both the individual and the collective consciousness, as Davis (1979: 49) notes:

The nostalgic reaction is most pronounced at those transitional phases in the life cycle that expect from us the greatest demands for identity change and adaptation. Similarly, in its collective manifestations nostalgia also thrives [...] on the rude transitions rendered in history, on the discontinuities and dislocations wrought by such phenomena as war, depression, civil disturbance, and cataclysmic natural disasters – in short, those events that cause masses of people to feel uneasy and to wonder whether the world and their being are quite what they always took them to be.

A remarkable feature of Shanghai nostalgia, however, is that whereas collective nostalgia is mostly for a period one has lived through, this trend is popular among people who are born after the Treaty Ports closed. As far as the writers of the books discussed in this chapter are concerned: Wang Anyi was born in 1954 and Chen Danyan in 1958. 1930s Shanghai merely lives on in the collective memory (mémoire collective), as coined by Maurice Halbwachs (1980: 86):

Every group develops the memory of its own past that highlights its unique identity vis-à-vis other groups. These constructed images provide the group with an account of its origin and development and thus allow it to recognize itself through time.

While individual memories are already unreliable and shaped by later experiences, the collective memory is also strongly influenced by post hoc social processes within its possessor’s group. It is the outcome of a selection of shared memories, which are passed on by the group’s members, and that are meaningful to its (aspired) identity. The selection, i.e. what is forgotten and what is remembered, arguably tells us as much about the present in which the collective memory is shared, as about the remembered past itself, since “the past is being continually re-made, reconstructed in the interest of the present,” as Frederic Bartlett (1932: 309) puts it in his seminal study Remembering.

Different actors in society – politicians, media, etc – play an important role in this reconstruction of the past by, for example, choosing sites of memory (such as

\footnote{121 As mentioned in the first chapter of this study, the term ‘1930s Shanghai’ does not refer to the exact period of the 1930s per se, but is used by the Shanghainese “to avoid using any phrase that may be too directly related to the colonial past,” pointed out by Lu ([Hanchao] 2002: 172) and Chen Danyan (2001: 83).}
monuments) or marks in time (such as commemoration days). Likewise, artists, directors, writers, take part in constructing the collective memory by choosing specific historic subjects for their works and creating imaged memories, so that “our imagination of ‘Shanghai’s jazz age’ in the early twentieth century,” as Yomi Braester (2010: 59) says, “may be tinted by later movies.” At the same time, art works with a historic subject reflect in different ways the collective memory as it is already present in society.

**Shanghai Nostalgia Versus Mao Nostalgia**

Shanghai reveals a moment of Chinese modernity defined as much by its tension with the rest of the nation as by its closer ties with the force field of world capitalism and by its matter-of-fact urban sophistication and rituals of everyday life based on consumption. Shanghai is often expected to offer an experience of a modernity dwelling on the material, social, and everyday culture of the city lived by autonomous individuals, as opposed to an intellectual project or political scheme, the mass mobilization and voluntarism of revolution and socialism. Thus, the cosmopolitan aura of current literature on Shanghai is underscored by a longing for locality, particularity, and rootedness, by the desire to define the modern culturally, that is, ahistorically, by ritualizing the consumption and quotidian forms of the semicolonial phase of the Chinese modern.

Zhang Xudong (2000a: 354-5)

From the mid-1980s to the 1990s, urban China witnessed the birth and growth of an industry of nostalgia in the realm of popular culture. A shared history of Maoist China dominated by successive political movements such as the anti-rightist campaign (1956-57), the Great Leap Forward (1958-62), and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) provided a space for the construction of a culture of nostalgia. Shanghai, China’s most cosmopolitan city as well as its financial, commercial, and industrial center was affected by a similar culture of nostalgia. Shanghai nostalgia, however, was not for its recent revolutionary past, but rather for its colonial heritage, which was a counterpart to “Mao nostalgia” or the nostalgia for the recent revolutionary past in other parts of China.

Tianshu Pan (2002)

Nostalgia should thus be “understood against the backdrop of acceleration and shocks of modern experience,” as also Wang Ban (2002: 670) notes, which “for all its excitement and adventure, also brings trauma and loss.” While Baudrillard (2001: 174) asserts that nostalgia assumes its full meaning “when the real is no longer what it used to be,” Raymond Williams reads nostalgia as “an acceptance of the status

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122 For an elaborate discussion of the terms *timemarks* and *sites of memory*, see Connerton 1989.
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quo,” as it entices people “to take refuge in an idealized past while avoiding a critical examination of and engagement with their present” (cited in Spitzer 1996: 620). In short, whereas a context of imminent change and overall disruption evokes a sense of placelessness, nostalgia provides the uprooted individual with a sense of stability in a collectively remembered home.

In Svetlana Boym’s (2001: 41) seminal study The Future of Nostalgia, she makes a distinction between ‘restorative nostalgia’ and ‘reflective nostalgia’:

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gap. Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance […] Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.

Shanghai nostalgia appears both in its reflective and its restorative form; exposing now a wistful longing for a bygone, romanticized past, then times an attempt to revive those memories which correspond to Shanghai’s dreamed future. In both cases, selective visions of the past help Shanghai residents to generate meaning in the present and anticipate the future. It should thus not be seen as an exclusively negative response to the city’s transformation, but also as a way of celebrating – or at least negotiating – the modernization process. Or as Dai Jinhua (1997: 145) argues in “Imagined Nostalgia,” an article which has become something of a classic:

The modernization of the 1990s, or the globalizing burst of progress, causes people to panic, as if they are teetering on the edge of the abyss. The wave of nostalgia brings new representations of history, making history the ‘presence in absentia’ that emits a ray of hope on the Chinese people’s confused and frenzied reality.

In addition, it is ongoing commercialization and the global city’s homogenizing space which scholars identify as important sources of Shanghai’s nostalgic mood.\(^{123}\) After being suppressed in the Mao era, commercialism is now experiencing a renaissance since China is back in the global arena of capitalism, with Shanghai in the vanguard. As Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson (1996: 115) put it:

Capitalism and commodification have bred the conditions for nostalgia. The maelstrom of capital disrupts and displaces traditional structures of family, community, and religion that previously buffered – even if in oppressive and mystifying ways – the experience of rapid social change.

Paradoxically, it is precisely the past period of full-blown capitalism that Shanghai is yearning for. However, to complicate things even more, simultaneously to Shanghai nostalgia, 1990s Shanghai experienced another wave of nostalgia that swept the whole nation: Mao nostalgia.¹²⁴

In the second chapter of this study, the story collection City Map showed how middle-aged male authors were more inclined to idealize life in Mao-era Shanghai, whereas the younger female authors mostly revealed a tendency towards Shanghai nostalgia, albeit in yet another fashion than the older female authors that I will discuss in the present chapter. Although this division evidently is not as absolute, it is interesting to note that, contrary to Shanghai nostalgia, Mao nostalgia encompasses a yearning for a past that many people have physically experienced. This commercialization of Mao in mass consumption, also called the ‘posthumous Mao cult’ or ‘Mao Zedong Fever,’ was most prominent in the early 1990s, right after the disillusionment effects of the government’s violent suppression of the Protest Movement in Beijing and other cities.¹²⁵ Mao’s image reappeared as decoration theme in all kinds of places and, in 1999, even all Chinese banknotes would be uniformly graced by it.

In his comprehensive study of contemporary Chinese culture, In the Red, Barmé (1999: chapter 12) concludes with a full chapter on the subject, called “Totalitarian Nostalgia,” discussing how, during the 1990s, China experienced many facets of totalitarian nostalgia, such as romanticizing images of the 1950s and 1960s in heroic films and mass culture, the Mao cult, and a commercial nostalgic revival of the Cultural Revolution. Barmé (1999: 316) argues that “the totalitarian temper in 1990s China constantly harks back to and feeds off lingering totalistic and totalizing temptations.” Whereas Barmé (1999: 317-9) maintains that the totalitarian nostalgia was institutionalized by the Chinese Communist Party, and should be understood as “a nostalgia for a language of denunciation that offered simple solutions to complex problems,” Yang Guobin (2003: 269) argues that it emerged as a form of cultural resistance against the drastic changes of social life. Drawing on in-depth interviews with former educated youth (born in the 1950s and 1960s), Yang concludes that for this generation, nostalgia is a means of identity construction.¹²⁶ In the Beijing Review of 5 October 2006, Gao Hua, a history professor at Nanjing University, also states that Mao nostalgia reveals discontent with society:

¹²⁴ Notably, in many post-communist countries, such as Russia and other Central and Eastern European countries, nostalgia for the communist period is a common feature. For some interesting theories on post-communist nostalgia in Russia, see Boym 1994. On several Eastern European countries, see Dryzek & Holmes 2002.
¹²⁵ For Mao nostalgia in cinema and fiction, see Dai [Jinhua] 2002: chapter 6. For Mao nostalgia the movie In the Heat of the Sun, see Braester 2003: chapter 9. For an anthology of Chinese writings on the Maoist revival in the 1990s, see Barmé 1996.
¹²⁶ Cf. Fred Davis (cited in Spitzer 1999: 92): “[Nostalgic memory] sets up the positive from within the ‘world of yesterday’ as a model for creative inspiration, and possible emulation, within the ‘world of the here-and-now.’ And, by establishing a link between a ‘self-in-present’ and an image of ‘self-in-past,’ nostalgic memory also plays a significant role in the reconstruction and continuity of individual and collective identity.”
Gao said that some people have a selective memory of Mao, screening out such events in the later years of his rule as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and taking Mao as a token of social justice to express their dissatisfaction over the current reality.

So, in their uneasiness with the cultural and social consequences of high-speed economic developments – materialism, consumerism, etc; unemployment, increasing inequality, etc. – people search for continuity in a shared past that is being idealized.

Although Shanghai nostalgia might seem distinct from, if not incompatible with, this nostalgia for the recent revolutionary past, both are arguably psychological responses to the city’s rapid transformation. I agree with Yang that part of this response is a search for a lasting and unifying identity. However, whereas in Mao nostalgia, Mao personifies the search for a renewed national identity, 1930s Shanghai represents a local identity for the Shanghainese. Without going into the problematic ambiguity of the term local identity, it is noteworthy that in domestic discourse ‘Shanghai identity’ is never opposed to the city’s colonial history, but intertwined with it. As mentioned earlier in this study, the first and foremost image of Shanghai is to be cosmopolitan, and to represent a mixture of cultures (commonly expressed in ‘East’ and ‘West’). Or as Chen Danyan (2004) puts it in her paper “One Who Grew Up Drinking Wolf Milk and Her Writing”:

Shanghai is still a mixed-blood place. In some ways, that makes the city lonely. In the eyes of other Chinese, particularly those from traditional Beijing, Shanghai is considered ugly and lacking in grace. As a Shanghainese, by contrast, I think our city’s mongrel character is empowering. […] I can no longer decide what is East and what is West. As a daughter of this great city, both are wrapped together inside me.

Architectural Preservation: Forward to the Past

Interestingly, this ‘mixed-blood’ nature of the city is accentuated in its remaining colonial architecture, which explains the buildings’ prominence in Shanghai nostalgia. What is more, whereas the iconic international buildings on the Bund represent Western culture in Shanghai, the longtang-houses are characterized by their unique, hybrid typology of the traditional Chinese courtyard house and the Western-style terrace house turning them into the embodiment of ‘Shanghai
culture, as illustrated by the following quote from Luo Xiaowei (1997b: 5), professor in architectural history and theory:

Reading the Shanghai longtang is like reading the social history of Shanghai and the Shanghai people. [...] Longtang is a product of Shanghai and belongs to the Shanghai people. As the city is now undergoing a large-scale reconstruction, the longtang of relatively good quality will be preserved and equipped with modern facilities, those of very poor condition will be demolished and those in-between will be reformed in different ways, such as preserving their appearance while making them suitable for modern living. In this period of great development and drastic change, it is meaningful and important to recall and discuss the relations between the Shanghai longtang, Shanghai people and Shanghai culture.

Likewise, author Yin Huifen asserts:

Some things are impossible to change, they are rooted in the heart of the city of Shanghai, like the longtang of Shanghai that are the place of Shanghai culture, and not the high-rises or new districts [...] I believe that no matter how much changes, the longtang will always remain, they can’t disappear. I’ve heard that new longtang will be built at places where there used to be longtang, remaining the style and flavor of longtang, that’s very good and important. (Cited in Zu Dingyuan 祖丁远 2006: 17)

After years of large-scale demolition, the government indeed started propagating longtang as representatives of a unique Shanghai culture. During the Shanghai World Expo 2010, for example, the above quote by Luo Xiaowei was republished on the Expo’s website next to an article that encouraged foreign visitors to spend one day with a family in a “traditional Shanghai longtang neighborhood” for 100

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127 Bracken (2009: 74) describes the longtang’ typology as follows: “They were a hybrid of the traditional Chinese courtyard house, the siheyuan, and the Western-style terrace. Most were speculative real-estate ventures and consisted of large blocks, typical of inner-city Shanghai (and other Chinese cities), which were divided into three or four smaller blocks and developed separately. According to Rowe, each venture was approximately 100 dwelling units. The main alleyway was usually four to five meters wide and invariably ran perpendicularly to the access street; in larger compounds smaller alleyways crossed this main one at right angles. The alleyways led to individual residences, with some commercial activity located along the boundary streets, although some informal commercial activity also occurred at the internal crossings. The houses themselves were usually two to four storey’s in height and varied in size and opulence, with basic units of anything from 60 to 105 square meters, typically with two rooms per floor.” For more on lilong, see particularly the works by Non Arkaraprasertkul.

128 Considering urban transformation in China at large, it is not surprising that similar developments (and their consequences) can be found throughout the country. In Beijing, for example, large-scale demolition of hutong 胡同 and siheyuan 四合院 (the Beijing version of alleys and courtyard houses, respectively) have triggered the same debate as in Shanghai on the issue of preservation and the local significance of these houses. See, for example: Broudehoux 2004: chapter 3. For cultural responses towards the demolition of hutong, see Braester 2010: chapter 3 and 6.
Yuan, which included “taking part in Shanghai longtang games (hoop rolling, shuttle-cock kicking, billiards and rubber band skipping),” and on which the Shanghai Daily (13 April 2010) reported: “These families will be natural ‘pavilions’ outside the Expo site, directly showcasing Shanghai culture.”

Likewise, the World Expo staged the theater show “Homeland: An Impression of Shanggang” 震爆派对 played by 300 former residents who in fact had to move house because of the Expo. The show included a scene entitled “Longtang Party” 弄堂派对 where the residents showed various ‘longtang life’ customs against a big screen with pictures of longtang houses. In this way, the municipal government commodifies Shanghai nostalgia as a useful means for the city to distinguish itself from other Chinese cities (like Beijing and Hong Kong) and constructs an exotic identity so as to be able to compete with international metropoles such as New York, London and Tokyo.

In their work on advertising strategies, Goldman and Papson (1996: 115) show how “advertisers turn nostalgia into a talisman to ward off fear of constant upheaval.” As market-oriented reform “not only generates entrepreneurial activities within the city but also creates the entrepreneurial agency of the city,” as pointed out by Wu Fulong (2009: 136), Shanghai nostalgia has thus become one of the key selling points in the practice of ‘city branding’ (cf. Hall and Hubbard 1998: 1-26, and Jakubowicz 2009: 156-171). For example, the municipal government’s slogan ‘to regenerate the prestige of the past (重振雄风)’ is collectively understood as a direct reference to pre-1949 Shanghai: implying that since Shanghai has proven to be able to become a cosmopolitan city of global importance in the past, it should be able to do so now as well.

For this reason, Abbas (2000: 783) argues that whereas the government’s increasing interest in the preservation and restoration of buildings from the colonial period might seem a way to “slow things down – to preserve some almost erased concept of civility and respect for otherness in the midst of chaos,” this is not the case in Shanghai; “preservation and heritage do not act as brakes against development; in some strange way, they further a developmental agenda.” It is not a matter of “back to the future,” but “forward to the past,” as Abbas (2002: 38) also famously stated, making it completely different from places such as Hong Kong:

In [Hong Kong], preservation is ad hoc and linked to anxiety over the city’s “disappearance”; in [Shanghai], it is state-planed and related to anticipations of the city’s “reappearance” as a City of Culture. (49)

It is also in that spirit we should read the boastful statement on Shanghai’s World Expo website (www.expocard.cn): “the wide scaled preservation of spectacular old buildings in the Shanghai Expo is the first of its kind in the history of Expo park construction since 1851.” In other words, cultural preservation is also a form to use the past as symbolic capital to make Shanghai attractive to foreign investors and the tourist industry.
However, representing a city is always a performative act, involving strategies and tactics of selective remembering and selective forgetting (cf. T.C. Chang 2005: 247). In the case of Shanghai, this selection is complicated by the fact that the past is insistently placed in a “triple historical framework,” as Abbas (2002: 41) notes:

Thinking about the Dongjiadu Church and other preservation projects in Shanghai requires at least a triple historical framework; one that holds together Shanghai as treaty port, Shanghai under communism, and contemporary Shanghai, with its ‘socialist market economy.’ It is a framework made up of disparate elements producing a discontinuous, sometimes incoherent, narrative about a city haunted by the past and obsessed by the future, and often confused about which is which.

Indeed, Shanghai’s preservation projects carefully bring the old buildings’ cosmopolitan glamour back to memory, while they ‘forget’ the darker sides of their colonial history: “preservation is selective and tends to exclude the dirt and pain,” in the words of Abbas (1997: 66). An interesting example is the large-scale restoration project of the buildings on the Bund that took place in the 1990s and 2000s, but for which I will briefly return to the Bund’s turbulent history.

In its heyday during the Treaty Port period, the Bund formed the beating financial and entertainment heart of Shanghai, world famous for containing the largest array of Art Deco ornamentation anywhere in the world (Boyer 2002: 58). When most international companies left the country after 1949, the Bund’s buildings were taken over by the Communist authorities. With the loss of foreign investments and tourism, the Bund soon “fell into oblivion,” Christian Henriot (2010: 24) writes:

The city was required to turn itself from a place where ‘consumption’ dominated – and corrupted its people – to a ‘productive’ socialist urban entity. The Bund ceased to be a marker of Chinese urban modernity. On the contrary, it came to be seen as a legacy of Western colonialism.

Even though the Bund was now experienced as a painful reminder of national humiliation, the city government’s limited budget for infrastructure and the buildings’ high-quality condition, made it simply not worth demolishing them (cf. Abbas 2002: 44 and Henriot 2010: 24). During the Cultural Revolution, however, Red Guards destroyed some of the ornaments and interiors of certain buildings; other buildings could be saved by people who were able to hide their most precious items and/or cover their decorated ceilings, floors, and walls. Consequently, when China opened up in the 1980s, the Bund had perhaps remained virtually unchanged from the outside, but the buildings nevertheless showed unmistakable traces of the city’s recent history and years of neglect had turned the Bund merely into a façade. Hence, people would refer to the Bund in particular, or Shanghai at large, as “a faded photograph” of what it once had been (Visser 2000: 150).
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In the 1990s, the city council decided it wanted to restore the buildings on the Bund and revive its previous prominence. However, even though the city “invested in a sumptuous illumination scheme to highlight the buildings on the Bund and to emphasize Shanghai’s glamour,” Henriot (2010: 25) argues, the buildings “have been voided of their historical content or substance”:

The colonial past has been pushed back into the fold of history and only the thin surface of its heritage, reinterpreted for both domestic and international consumption, is being promoted. The Bund has become a ‘heritage’in a quasi UNESCO fashion, a set of historical monuments worth preserving for their own sake, not necessarily for what they represent historically but worth preserving for what they convey in the current search of Shanghai for a robust new identity, a renewed identity as the city reconnects with the world in the context of the post-Deng reforms. In Shanghai, this re-evaluation was nurtured by a reconstruction of the collective memory of the colonial past. The Bund buildings were, mutatis mutandis, the material blocks that gave reality to a reinvented and sanitized past. This reinterpreted past – actually a de-historicized past – fit both the ambitions of local leaders and the expectations of the local population to put Shanghai into the forefront of Chinese modernity.

The Bund is can arguably be regarded as, what Pierre Nora (1989: 7-14) named, a monumental memory-site (lieu de mémoire): a “material, symbolic, and functional” designated by the state “where [cultural] memory crystallizes and secretes itself.”

As with the buildings on the Bund, restoration projects of longtang buildings and neighborhoods are also intent on preservation “without the dirt and pain”; whereas their characteristic architecture derives from colonial influences, their uniqueness is highlighted as ‘typical Shanghainese’ but without any reference to the origin of these influences. According to the head of the Shanghai Municipal Heritage Department, Wang Anshi 王安石, the government has set a list with 12.18 million m² of residential buildings built before 1949.129 Some are restored and/or rebuilt into tourists complexes, such as the well-known Xintiandi project, promoted with the slogan ‘Yesterday meets tomorrow today’ (昨天、明天，相会在今天), and whose name Xintiandi 新天地 would even become a verb in the meaning of ‘to create a trendy, commercial neighborhood with an architectural heritage flavor’ (Braester 2010: 23). The project entailed the complete restoration of shikumen-style longtang in the centre of Shanghai, covering a seven-acre tourist complex with restaurants, cafés, nightclubs, and luxury boutiques. While suiting the trend of Shanghai nostalgia to the full, the Chinese government peculiarly chose the district surrounding the First Congress Hall of the Chinese Communist Party, which renovated building now houses a museum on the history of the Chinese Communist

129 For a list of publications on Shanghai’s restoration projects, see Wang Anshi’s website: www.aibaohu.com/jsp/blog/content0_10.jsp.
Party. In other words, whereas the architecture of the Xintiandi area forms a manifest remembrance of colonial Shanghai, its inclusion of a memory site of Communist power presumably endeavors to erase latent reminiscences of colonial power.

Other old lilong-neighbourhoods are restored into modernized, luxury residential complexes, of which the Jianyeli project is a recent example: a residential community with 51 shikumen-style longtang, 62 apartments and more than 4,000 square meters of retail space, on which the selected American architect Portman remarks in China Daily (6 May 2010):

We will make it a residential community, not a tourist attraction, we want to be as true to the existing architecture as possible. But only inside, we have to recognize that this is the twenty-first century, and we’re doing the inside in such a way that anybody living there will have everything they need.\(^{130}\)

With “the inside” Portman evidently refers to modern facilities and sanitation, but what about the way people used to live in these longtang? No matter how truthfully Portman will restore the architecture of these unique houses, it will indeed just be the outside that resembles its origin.

It is precisely for this reason that many Shanghai residents who reject the demolition of longtang neighbourhoods are equally against restoration.\(^{131}\) A well-known example is the documentary Nostalgia 乡愁 by Shu Haolun 舒浩仑,\(^{132}\) on the longtang neighborhood Shu grew up in as a child, which is about to be demolished.\(^{133}\) The documentary shows the daily life of Shu’s family members who still live in the neighborhood, and opens with Shu Haolun’s words:

One day my grandmother called me and told me that the newspaper said our neighborhood Da Zhongli had been sold to a Hong Kongnese developer and would soon be demolished. In the city of Shanghai, the demolition of whole neighborhoods and the relocation of its residents is quite a common thing. But when I heard this news, it suddenly didn’t feel like a common thing anymore.

\(^{130}\) For a critical study on the displacement of the old residents of the Jianyeli district, I highly recommend Laurans 2005.

\(^{131}\) Obviously, this is not to say that most people are against the demolition of longtang neighbourhoods. The narrator of Ding Ling’s “Come Over” (discussed in chapter 2), for example, lamented “if only they would tear down this place a bit faster.” And also the author Ding Ling herself criticized in an interview (Shanghai, June 2010) the people who tended to idealize community life in the old neighborhoods, without recognizing the poor living conditions.

\(^{132}\) Nostalgia received a lot of media attention and became a big hit in Shanghai. For more information on the documentary, see: http://spaces.msn.com/haolunshu and www.mocashanghai.org/activity/xianglian-e.htm.

\(^{133}\) Other art works by Shanghai artists criticizing the demolition of longtang neighbourhoods include Hu Yang’s 胡杨 photograph series “Shanghai Longtang,” Zhang Jianjun’s 張健君 video art “Vestiges of a Process: Shikumen Project 2008”, Li Guoli’s 李国立 movie Shanghai Fever, and Liang Yunting’s oil painting series “A Series of Shanghai Alleyways.”
This was about my home. The house I grew up in is in Da Zhongli, the neighborhood that will now ‘quite commonly’ be demolished to become more of those shining skyscrapers. The only thing I can do is to take my camera and go to my old home in Da Zhongli before it has turned into a skyscraper. I want to write my nostalgia through the lens.

However, Shu Haolun sees no solution in the restoration of these buildings, since: “If Da Zhongli has any chance of being ‘preserved’ it will only be as a Xintiandi-type yuppie place” (cited in Visser 2010a: 38). In short, the architecture might be preserved, but not the daily lives of his family that he perceives as representative of a traditional Shanghai lifestyle. Or to put it in the words of Wang Anyi: “you could say a longtang is a certain type of architecture, but what it actually is, is a way of life.”

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**WANG ANYI: THE SONG OF EVERLASTING SORROW OF SHANGHAI’S LONGTANG\]**

Looked down upon from the highest point in the city, Shanghai’s longtang – her vast neighborhoods inside enclosed alleys – are a magnificent sight. The longtang are the backdrop of this city. Streets and buildings emerge around them in series of dots and lines, like the subtle brushstrokes that bring life to the empty expanses of white paper in a traditional Chinese landscape painting. As day turns into night and the city lights up, these dots and lines begin to gimmer. However, underneath the glitter lies and immense blanket of darkness – these are the longtang of Shanghai. (3)

Thus opens the novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* by Wang Anyi, whose cover tellingly features a picture of a longtang. As if she is just one of the diverse elements that constitute a longtang neighborhood, Wang Anyi only introduces the novel’s protagonist Wang Qiyao 王琦瑶 after four chapters of meticulous descriptions of the longtang in a personified way: the houses are “sensual,” “naive,” “a little self-centered,” they “dream” and “gossip,” and have “no clue of politics.” The longtang are in a sense even more ‘human’ than Wang Qiyao who serves merely as an archetype embodying the spirit of the longtang:

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. The longtang neighborhoods of Shanghai are filled with a girlish spirit – the name of this spirit is Wang Qiyao. (25)

\[134\] Interview with Wang Anyi, in Rotterdam in November 2009. For the whole interview, see Scheen 2010b.
\[135\] An earlier version of this paragraph was publised in the *IIAS Newsletter*, see Scheen 2010a.
Through Wang Qiyao the real protagonist of the novel thus seems to be the longtang itself, or, in the words of Qi Hong 卞红 and Lin Zhou 林舟 (1995:1): “Shanghai’s alleys, Shanghai’s atmosphere, Shanghai’s thought and spirit,” which brings back to mind the words of Luo Xiaowei: “Reading the Shanghai longtang is like reading the social history of Shanghai and the Shanghai people.” According to Visser (2010a: 208-9), it is thus no coincidence that The Song of Everlasting Sorrow was written in a time when the longtang came under threat:

[...] the novel elegizes a local loss, in particular, the passing away of the unique ethos of Shanghai’s alleyway courtyard neighborhoods. This dominant urban form, and the lifestyles it sustained, prevailed throughout decades of historical vicissitudes, including wartime and the Cultural Revolution, when all traditional or capitalist elements were supposed to be destroyed, only to be laid waste at the onslaught of global developmentalism. Writing in the mid-1990s, as Shanghai urban development was taking off this a vengeance, Wang Anyi mourns the intensely personal losses sustained by globalization, for, as many insist, Shanghai without its longtang is no longer Shanghai.

Even though the timeframe of the three parts of The Song of Everlasting Sorrow corresponds to the political periods of pre-Mao, Mao, and post-Mao, it is not a historical novel in the strict sense;\(^{136}\) 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.\(^{137}\) “Something is flowing in the longtang,” as the narrator tells us, “it has nothing to do with things like ‘history,’ not even ‘unofficial history’: we can call it gossip” (7). The novel rewrites the history of Shanghai from its citizens’ perspective, instead of from the more conventional perspective of historical, influential figures. It is in the city’s endless gossip hidden under the longtang’s “immense blanket of darkness” that, according to its narrator, “the true heart of this city can be found” (10).

Several scholars have pointed out that the longtang setting should also be read as a symbol of Shanghai’s middleclass life, such as Zhang ([Xudong] 2008: 202), who notes in his illuminating reading of The Song of Everlasting Sorrow:

As an architectural, social, and psychological space, the longtang is the embodiment of middle-class Shanghai, its privacy (or lack of it) and its material

\(^{136}\) Visser (2010a: 208) and Wang ([Ban] 2004: 226) do not read the novel’s three-part structure as a reference to China’s political history but to its history of modernity.

culture (or its ‘transcendence’); it records the ways and gestures by which this middle class shelters itself from the brutal forces of history.\footnote{And also Visser (2010a: 209), for example, notes: “The resulting composite [of The Song of Everlasting Sorrow] conveys a complex mixture of grief and ambivalence over the eradication of an alluring […] middle-class consumer lifestyle uniquely manifest in the everyday life of the Shanghai longtang.”}

Although I agree with Zhang Xudong’s observation that the novel celebrates ‘middle-class life / culture’ (which in its depiction becomes almost interchangeable with the idea of ‘Shanghai life / culture’ and/or consumerism), I do think it is important to note that Shanghai knows several types of longtang that are associated with different classes, which is also reflected in the novel, as I will show later.

In his work \textit{Lilong Dwellings in Shanghai}, Shen Hua (1993) defines five subtypes of longtang houses: the old-style shikumen (老式石库门, ‘stone gate houses,’ built in the 1870s-1910s), late shikumen (后期石库门, 1910s-1920s), new-style lilong (新式里弄, 1910s-1940s), garden lilong (花园里弄, 1920s-1940s), and the apartment lilong (公寓里弄, 1930s-1940s). The late shikumen were less spaciously built than the old-style shikumen due to the increasing spatial constraints in the rapidly growing city. Whereas the shikumen “are believed to derive from a more native dwelling concept and value system,” as Chunlan Zhao (2004: 49) observes, the new-style lilong “is believed to have its origin in western dwelling culture brought in by foreign sojourners and welcomed by locals.” The garden lilong (‘urban villas’) and apartment lilong were the more luxurious types with modern facilities. Roughly speaking, the lower / middle class lived in the shikumen, the middle class in the new-style lilong, the middle / upper class in the apartment lilong, and the upper class and extremely rich in the garden lilong. Or, in the words of the narrator:

Shanghai’s longtang come in many forms, each with colors and sounds of its own […] Those [shikumen longtang 石库门弄堂] that have entryways with stone gates emanate an aura of power. […] But, upon entering one discovers that the courtyard is modest and the reception area is narrow – two or three steps and you are already at the wooden staircase across the room. […]

The trendy [new-style lilong 新式里弄] neighborhoods in the eastern district of Shanghai have done away with such haughty airs. They greet you with low wrought-iron gates of floral design. […] Fragrant oleanders reach out over the courtyard walls, as if no longer able to contain their springtime passion. Deep down, however, those inside still have their guard up: the back doors are bolted shut with spring locks of German manufacture, the windows on the ground floor all have steel bars, the low front gates of wrought iron are crowned with ornamented spikes, and the walls protect the courtyard on all sides. […]
On the western side of the city, the [apartment-style longtang 公寓弄堂] take an even stricter approach to security. These structures are built in clusters, with doors that look as if not even an army of ten thousand could force their way inside. [...] This is security of a democratic sort – trans-Atlantic style – to ensure and protect individual freedom. Here people can do whatever their hearts desire, and there is no one to stop them. (4-5)

Indeed, it is also through the portrayals of Wang Qiyao’s improving longtang residences, that the reader comes to understand Wang’s improving social status. Even more striking about the novel is that Wang Qiyao’s personal experiences and the city’s historical events are mirrored in the changing physical appearance of the longtang.

During the glorious days of cosmopolitan Shanghai in part I – “a city of wealth, colours, and stunning women” (45) – the longtang are described in the following way:

First to appear are the dormer windows protruding from a rooftop tingzijian [pavilion room] 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. (3)

This is the backdrop against which Wang Qiyao’s story begins in 1946, when she is sixteen years old and participates in the Miss Shanghai contest, a contest that has a long history in Shanghai: starting with the ‘flower lists’ 花榜 that ranked Shanghai prostitutes in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1126) and developing into the ‘flower contest’ 花選 (organized by Li Boyuan 李伯元 (1867-1906) for the Entertainment 游戏报 and the New World 新世界报) and the Miss Shanghai contest later on (Yeh [Catherine] 2007: 221). Wang Qiyao ranks third place in the contest.

Leading a glamorous life as a model and mistress of the important Nationalist officer Director Li, Wang Qiyao is able to escape her humble background: while growing up in the crowded alley of a simple old-style shikumen longtang, Wang now moves into a broad (new-style) longtang – “just off a quiet and secluded main street […] lined on both sides with two-storey apartment buildings with gardens and garages” (49) – to live with the family of her friend Jiang Lili, and where she discovers that even the nightly lights and sounds are different from her old home:

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Sometimes she thought to herself, *even the moon here is different*. The moon back home was a small courtyard moon, stained by the smell of kitchen smoke and lampblack; the moon here came from a scene in a novel, its light shining on flowers and rambling plants. […] Back home she could always tell whose baby was crying or which mother was berating her child; she could identify the sounds of rats racing beneath the floor, or the sound of a toilet flushing. Here only one sound had an identity. The lord of all sounds – and that was the sound of the bell tower ringing. (63)

Interestingly, the sensuous experience of Qiyao’s new home not only shows how she moved from an underclass environment to the middleclass, but also her detachment from this new world that seems unreal (“a scene in a novel”) and impersonal in a ghostly manner. Instead of hearing the sounds of people’s daily life, Qiyao only hears the sound of Shanghai’s colonial occupier: the Customs House bell, chiming Western melodies on the quarter hours in imitation of London’s Big Ben.139

In 1948, Director Li rents an ‘apartment lilong’ for Wang Qiyao in the luxurious Alice Apartments 爱丽丝公寓 – “a charming world of satin, gauze, velvet, and tassels” – which provides Wang with yet other sensuous experiences of lights and sounds that reveal much of the lives inside those apartments:

Alice Apartments is a quiet island in the midst of the noisy city. […] As soon as the sun goes down, the iron gate is clanged shut, leaving a small side door illuminated by an electric lamp as the only point of entry. (111) Alice Apartments may look quiet on the surface, but underneath it is restive, because the hearts of those who live there are oppressed. You can hear this in the ringing of the telephones behind those heavy window curtains. It reverberates in the large living room, even though, having passed through satin and brocade, the eager sound is muted. The telephone is a crucial item in the Alice Apartments, serving as the artery through which life-force flows. […] Doorbells ringing are of equal significance. Unlike the lingering notes of telephones, however, doorbells tend to be snappy, assertive, overbearing. […] These two kinds of sound roam Alice Apartments at will with a proprietary air. (113)

Again, Qiyao’s social climbing is accompanied with a feeling of being cut off from daily life. Living in the “society girl apartment” – “Being a society girl is a profession unique to Shanghai, halfway between wife and prostitute” (114) – comes at the price of loneliness and the realization that this life’s “glory is as fleeting as passing clouds.” Indeed, Qiyao’s charmed life ends with Director Li getting killed in a plane crash, and Wang being left with only a small box of his gold bars.

Whereas the romantic depiction of a city of beauty contests, movie studios, and fashion confirms the novel’s nostalgic image, the narrator does not show an

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139 For more on the history of the bell of the Custom House, see Wasserstrom 2006.
idealized vision of the city’s colonizers or colonial power. For this reason, I disagree with Shih’s ([Shu-mei] 2001: viii) argument that no text better captures “colonial nostalgia, not by the colonizers but by the ex-colonized” than *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Instead, I would argue that Shih’s (2001: 374) observation of Shanghai citizens’ “strategy of bifurcating the ‘colonial West / Japan’ and the ‘metropolitan West / Japan’,” as discussed in the first chapter of this study, is also valid for Wang Anyi’s novel. For example, the narrator’s critical attitude towards the ‘colonial West / Japan’ becomes evident in the following passage where the protagonist strolls along the Bund:

With their backs to the water they couldn’t help gazing up at the grand fortress-like buildings created by the British during the days of the treaty ports. The overweening style of the architecture could be traced back to the Roman empire; it was designed to look down over everything, impressing viewers with an air of tyrannical power. Fortunately, behind these magnificent buildings was an expanse of narrow streets and alleys that led to the *longtang* houses, whose spirit was democratic. (274)

So, pursuing Shih’s line of thought, one could argue that whereas the Western-influenced *longtang* represent a modern ‘metropolitan West’-lifestyle which the citizens embrace, the majestic buildings on the Bund stand for the suppressive ‘colonial West’-power which the citizens reject. Accordingly, all scenes directly related to politics take place on the Bund, while the daily lives of the characters, i.e. the main theme of the novel, take place in the narrow streets behind this grand façade of colonial power.

At the beginning of the second part, set in the Mao period, Wang Qiyao has left Shanghai after the death of Director Li to live with her grandmother in the countryside. To retreat to the countryside has been a common theme in Chinese literature and film, and is mostly depicted as a positive time in which the characters are able to reflect on their confusing life in the city. Furthermore, the retreat often symbolizes a search for roots, which can represent “personal roots” (practically all Chinese have ancestors from the countryside) or roots in a broader sense standing for (traditional) Chinese culture. “Miss Shanghai” Qiyao, however, does not feel at home in the countryside and takes a train back to Shanghai: “the first sign of Shanghai – the illuminated water treatment plant in Zhabei – brought tears to her eyes” (160).

In this part Wang Qiyao has to start from scratch again, making ends meet as the neighborhood nurse in a rundown *shikumen*-style *longtang* reminiscent of her
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childhood. However, in the private space of the longtang, daily life runs its normal course, seemingly untouched by the political upheaval surrounding it. Neighbors and friends meet in Wang Qiyao’s home, eating, drinking, chatting, gossiping, having afternoon tea, and even more ‘decadent’ activities, such as dancing and playing mahjong. According to Howard Choy (2008: 177), this “quotidian depoliticization can be read as a manifesto of Shanghai’s citizens, who strategically take an ex-centric position to stay away from the communist commotion.” It is indeed precisely the longtang neighborhood which provides the characters a space to stay away, and where they can continue a quasi-colonial (‘metropolitan West’) lifestyle that was otherwise basically impossible during the Mao period.\(^{140}\) In other words, in this part of the novel the longtang becomes a safe haven, which is also reinforced by the alley’s name Peace Lane 平安里.\(^{141}\) Although, “in the socialist period, Wang Qiyao and her associates are no longer consumers in the strict sense,” as Wang ([Ban] 2004: 230) points out in his insightful reading of the novel:

But the commodity’s images live on in their life, as something not governed by exchange value, but as a basic resource for survival and for a reasonable decent human existence. In the numerous scenarios of ritualized living and consumption in the longtang, the commodity in its downfall paradoxically rises to a more elevated status as an everyday cult around which the aura of a vanished life is imagined, savored, or even enacted.

In other words, in the second part of the novel the longtang becomes in a sense a memory-site of cosmopolitan Shanghai’s consumer culture. It serves as much as a concrete hiding place, as well as a symbolic materialization of a collective memory.

All this abruptly ends in 1966, when Wang Qiyao’s then lover commits suicide by throwing himself out the window. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) is largely omitted, which is rather striking for a work that deals with forty years of Shanghai history, the city where the Cultural Revolution was instigated and experienced its peak. However, even though the novel does not explicitly narrate the traumatic incidents of this period, it is again through the depiction of the longtang that one can painfully sense the atmosphere of over-all devastation, and indirectly read the city’s desertedness after its youth was sent to the countryside, how the remaining citizens were severely restricted in their private lives, and the public humiliations that had taken place:


\(^{141}\) As Peace Lane is a very common alley name in Shanghai, the name may also serve as yet another indicator that “Wang Qiyao is the typical daughter of the Shanghai longtang” (22), leading a common life, as also noted by Huang ([Michelle] 2004: 124), who further reads the alley’s name as “giving an ironic twist for the mishap at the end of the story.”
**Figure 4-4** The front page of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, part III.

In the final part of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, Shanghai embraces the market economy model. Wang Qiyao, who still lives in the same old *longtang* in Peace Lane, has more difficulties to adapt than her illegitimate daughter Weiwei: “Aside from its being chaotic and timeworn, what troubled Wang Qiyao about this era of Weiwei and her friends was its vulgarity” (301). As a former Miss Shanghai, Wang Qiyao becomes a symbol of the colonial period and attracts a young boy, who idolizes her because of his “endless longing for the Shanghai of the forties” (370). Wang Qiyao ironically calls him Old Color (‘lao kela’ 老克腊),\(^{142}\) a name people used to refer to young people nostalgic for the semi-colonial past.

However, Old Colour’s nostalgia for colonial Shanghai reveals itself to be a superficial admiration of only its outer appearance and not its spirit (cf. Wang [Ban] 2004: 233). Accordingly, he soon realizes that his beloved old city and Wang Qiyao are both fading irrevocably away, just like the *longtang* in that period:

> 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. […] It is only through sheer patience and self-control that it holds itself together, otherwise it would simply explode. It seems to understand that nothing good would come of exploding. (299 and 301)

In a way, Wang Qiyao and the *longtang*, as the symbols of colonial Shanghai, have become no more than empty shells, just like Bracken (2009: 81) remarks on the Xintiandi area:

\(^{142}\) Notably, according to Zhang ([Xudong] 2008: 326) his name should be translated as Old Class, since ‘kela’ is “a Shanghai Pidgin English word for *class*, in the sense of personal elegance; Wang Anyi traces it to the word *color*, by mistake.” However, for the reading of the novel, I consider the explanation of the narrator as most relevant.
Xintiandi is preserving nothing more than a shell – an interesting and attractive one, but a shell nonetheless – the life that once made these places really interesting is gone, perhaps forever.

**Aging Beauty, Collapsing Longtang**

*The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* borrows its title from a narrative poem by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) about the tragic love story between Tang emperor Xuanzong and his most beautiful concubine Yang Guifei. 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 order her to commit suicide. The poem can be read as an elegy on transience, on fading beauty, and closes with Xuanzong’s lamenting words: “While even heaven and earth will one day come to an end, this everlasting sorrow shall endure” (translation by Berry 2008: 437). Wang Anyi’s story also ends in the murder of a tragic beauty: Wang Qiyao is murdered for the one possession by which she nostalgically kept the past alive – Li’s gold bars, symbols of old Shanghai:

Long Legs wrapped his large hands around Wang Qiyao’s throat. Look at how thin her neck is, just skin and bones, it’s enough to make me sick! […] He looked at her face: so ugly and desiccated. Her hair was brittle and the roots were grey, but the rest was dark and shiny with hair dye – how comical! (427; italics in original)

With the dead Wang Qiyao lying on the floor of her longtang apartment in Peace Lane, the narrator zooms out until a bird-eye view of the longtang neighborhood, reminiscent of the opening of the novel. But now that the “girlish spirit” of the longtang has died, the aged longtang also breathes its last breath:

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. (428)

However, this does not necessary imply that it should be read as a direct condemnation of the disappearance of Shanghai’s unique longtang housing. Although the narrator mourns the end of the longtang’ (pre-Mao-era) cosmopolitan aura and the (Mao-era) social life that these houses facilitated (which could be summarized as a ‘Tönnies’ gemeinschaft’), 143 she seems very aware of the irreversibility of this process as well. For example, when Wang Qiyao, in the late

143 In 1887, Ferdinand Tönnies published his seminal work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, in which he explains his concept of *gemeinschaft* as a social group in which individuals are more oriented to the large group than to their own self-interest.
1980s, visits a party in an apartment of a newly built high-rise building, she remarks:

When you first arrive here, the place seems to lack a heart because it so carefree – but that is because it hasn’t yet had time to build up a reservoir of recollections; its mind is blank and has not begun to feel the need to call on its memory. (367)

So, in other words, it might very well be possible that in a hundred years we will read the story of Wang Qiyao’s grandchild nostalgically longing for Shanghai’s glorious period of mushrooming skyscrapers when the city was “like a huge sponge that, having been dried up to long, opened its pores to soak up all the pleasure it could” (338).

In conclusion, because of its romantic depiction of a 1930s lifestyle in the private space of the colonial-built longtang, The Song of Everlasting Sorrow is commonly regarded as a prime example of Shanghai nostalgia. Certainly, the tragic life story of Wang Qiyao resonates with the collective memory of the city’s history: from a young beauty in the last days of the glamorous Pearl of the Orient, whose rising social status was reflected in the improving styles of her longtang residences, to a common nurse in a rundown longtang neighborhood in Mao-era Shanghai, until an aging lady echoing a far-gone era who dies in her crumbling longtang. As I have argued, however, this nostalgic mood should not be mistaken with nostalgia for colonial power, and neither with criticism of the large-scale demolition of the longtang houses.

Instead, what the narrator mourns, seeing the decay of Shanghai reflected in its longtang, is the transcendence of time:144 “when small holes appeared in the wooden floor and staircase, you might say that what you saw was the work of termites, but what Wang Qiyao saw was time” (352). In this respect, I agree with Michael Berry (2008: 434-5), who reads the novel’s nostalgic theme in its “literary déjà vu”:

Cycles of repetition reflect not only Wang Anyi’s ingenious literary design, but the heroine Wang Qiyao’s tragic quest to reclaim her memories, revisit her past, and relive her lost loves. It is tragic because, with each affair, with each romance, more of herself gets stripped away and destroyed. […] But isn’t that what nostalgia is all about? An incurable longing for what is lost but can never be recovered.

In other words, whereas it is debatable whether ‘Shanghai nostalgia’ is the right label for The Song of Everlasting Sorrow, the novel is unmistakably pervaded by a

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144 Cf. Choy 2008: 175: “Wang Anyi concern is less an authentic reproduction of a world in the past than the passage of time per se.”

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generic nostalgic longing for lost times of the protagonist’s own life and the city she represents:

“Do you ever feel that this city has aged?” he asked Wang Qiyao. She laughed. “Is there anything that does not age?” She went on after a pause. “Look at me, I’m evidence of that! What right do I have to expect other things not to age too?” (378)

Finally, taking the Chinese convention of autobiographical reading into account, it is noteworthy that the novel’s author, Wang Anyi, has her own personal memories of growing up in a longtang. So, couldn’t the novel’s nostalgic air also simply be a reflection of its author’s wistful yearning for her own lost youth? The following story Wang Anyi told an audience in Rotterdam in 2009 seems to suggest this:

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 neighborhood. 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 recognized: my childhood in the longtang neighborhood, my longtang life when I was a child, when children would play together in the backyards. Most longtang have their kitchen windows in back, so the smells and sounds of cooking are constantly there, while inside the houses, old people chat in the most beautiful Shanghainese.… In 1998, I went to Amsterdam to promote the Dutch translation of one of my novels. The publisher had booked me a room in a small hotel, on a canal. I was lonely, and the murky and overcast sky made things worse, making me feel depressed. But when I got out of bed the next day and opened the curtains, I looked out on a small yard that seemed so similar to the longtang of Shanghai that Amsterdam suddenly felt very familiar – and this gave me peace of mind. (Cited in Scheen 2010a: 32.)

CHEN DANYAN: THE LITERARY PRESERVATION OF SHANGHAI MEMORABILIA

If you have time to wander around the old buildings and old houses of Shanghai, no matter if you know anyone there, just walk into the hallway, pass through the corridor where the mailboxes used to be, ascend the public stairway and take the public elevator down; maybe then you will understand why the Shanghainese indulge in nostalgia. (79)

Chen Danyan, in “A Reason for Nostalgia” "怀旧的理由"

As Chen Danyan remarks in her afterword to the essay collection Shanghai Memorabilia, she did five years of intensive research to write her Shanghai Trilogy:
reading history books, interviewing people, searching for old photographs, taking pictures, etc. By writing it, Chen (2001: 314) “found out things she never knew and saw things she never paid attention to before,” which made the writing process “like going to school to study the city of Shanghai.” Indeed, in this series the city is thematized, foregrounded. In the words of Bal (1997: 136): “it is an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes here an ‘acting place’ rather than the ‘place of action.’”

As in the case of The Song of Everlasting Sorrow, this pronounced Shanghai theme contributed to the trilogy’s success, though its “unique (at the time) eye-catching cover designs” also played a part, as Kong (2005: 52) observes:

WPH [Writers Publishing House] turned her books into works of fine art. First, it inserted many old black-and-white photographs of Shanghai from the 1920s to 1940s, not just to complement the books’ nostalgic tone but also to fully exploit the craze for old photos. Also, the page margins and cover designs were in Victorian design style […] this style embodied European taste. By catching the wave of ‘nostalgia chic’ at the fin de siècle, Chen’s books sold well among new, middle-class urban professionals and college students and proved WPH’s ability to make the most of a book’s visual potential.

In Shanghai Memorabilia, Chen Danyan gives vivid accounts of her strolls around Shanghai’s streets, alleys, and the Bund, passing Western-style apartments, bank buildings, dancing halls, restaurants, shops, and pubs. Just like Huang ([Michelle] 2004: 234) remarks on the essays by Wang Anyi, for Chen “walking is to associate once again the unfamiliar new cityscape with something old, borrowed from memories.” Thus, by bringing back to life 1930s in both its immaterial and material guises, the collection constitutes a literary report about Shanghai’s cultural history, and in particular about Western influences then and now.

Not surprisingly, Shanghai Memorabilia is, as the title already suggests, perhaps the more nostalgic in tone of both trilogies. Nicole Huang (2005: 191-2), however, justly notes:

To be sure, ‘memorabilia’ is not a precise translation of the expression fenghua xueyue [风花雪月], which is in fact a grouping of recurrent elements in China’s sentimental literary tradition: ‘wind, flowers, snow, and moon.’ Nevertheless ‘memorabilia’ effectively sums up a generational fascination with everything from Shanghai’s past, even trivial items such as anonymous photo albums. This entire genre can therefore be referred to as ‘memorabilia literature.’

Each narrated place in Shanghai Memorabilia provides a starting point for the reconstruction of Shanghai’s history. For example, in “Backdrop” 布景 the narrator describes a pub where “when you enter you feel like you’re entering Shanghai in the
1930s” (29), and continues with a story about life in those days. In like manner, “Aged Houses” 旧屋 tells the story of a woman who works at an office in an “European-style old building” and likes the building so much that after work she would often not go home but stay and sit alone in front of the window, fantasizing about the time “when there was still only one family living in this building”:

[...] she always listened to the chirping and cracking sounds from the surrounding old trees, that had been there from the beginning.

She was born in the 1950s and had no idea why she liked the 1930s so much that when she was alone in the big room, she would even suffer hallucinations: she could see the house as it used to be, right in front of her. The bright lamplights, noisy voices, people wearing 1930s qipao’s and Western-style suits, women with their hair combed back in a bun, all running up and down the hallway; it was an extremely wealthy family. (71-2)

So, although the city’s remaining 1930s relics are fading away, the atmosphere of an old building can easily awaken imagined memories, and reveal how they still linger in the collective memory of the Shanghaiese, after they have been suppressed for nearly eighty years.

Unsurprisingly, Chen denounces the large-scale demolition of Shanghai’s old houses, such as in the essay “Antique and Curios on Fuyou Road” 福佑路旧货街 where the narrator visits a small street where people sell antiques and where she buys an old book, tellingly entitled Tales from Old Shanghai 旧上海的故事. At the end of the story, the narrator describes how she went back one day to find a completely deserted street, with empty houses that all have the big, circled character on their wall which marks buildings to be demolished: 拆 (‘tear down’). She immediately looks for a high spot and takes as many pictures of the characters as possible.

The scene is reminiscent of the art work “One hundred demolition drawings” 百拆图 (1999) by the Beijing artist Wang Jinsong 王竞松 which features one hundred photographs of walls with the character ‘拆’. However, whereas in Wang Jinsong’s art work the collage of cold, impersonal characters seem to expose the

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145 All quotations from Shanghai Memorabilia come from Chen Danyan 2001. Like with the titles of the trilogy’s books, I use the English translations that are printed next to the Chinese titles of the chapters of Shanghai Memorabilia.

146 Interestingly, the English title “Aged Houses” (printed next to the Chinese title in the original) arguably reveals how in the works of Chen Danyan, Shanghai’s old houses are presented in a comparable manner as in The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: the choice for a translation into a personified ‘aged’ instead of the more obvious ‘old’ attributes a personal nature to the houses.

147 Other well-known art works criticizing large-scale demolition in Beijing include Zhang Dali’s 张大力 photograph series “Dialogue” 对话, Ou Ning’s 欧宁 documentary “Meishi Street” 煤市街, and Zhang Nian’s video art “Demolish Beijing” 拆北京. For more on the theme of demolition in art and cinema, see Visser 2010a: chapter 3, Lu [Sheldon] 2007b, and Braester 2007 and 2010: chapter 6.
lack of attention to the human subject in the city’s demolition craze.\textsuperscript{148} Chen Danyan’s essay draws attention to the erasure of Shanghai’s history and thus the city’s culture.\textsuperscript{149} After all, the essay significantly portrays the disappearance of a place that is not only itself a relic of 1930s culture, but also a place where the last remaining relics are sold: an antique market.

Another example is the essay “1993: Great Demolition in Shanghai” where the narrator walks through the former foreign concessions and notices that many shops she used to frequent, or houses she used to visit, have disappeared. Everywhere she looks, houses are being demolished, but what surprises her most is that “these beautiful old houses” are demolished to build “new ugly-style buildings that are plain replicas of European buildings”:

As they will build only copies of copies, then why should the one-hundred-years old, real colonial-style buildings have to disappear under the iron hammers of rural migrants? (79)

Again, the narrator reflects not so much on the impact of urban renewal on the individual, as on its inherent menace to the city’s local identity. Whereas the old buildings – characterized by their mixture of European and Chinese styles – are recurrently represented as containing an authentic Shanghai culture, the new, entirely European-style buildings are considered empty simulacra, reminding one of Shi Yong’s image of Shanghai as “readily reproducible and superficial surfaces,” as mentioned in the previous chapter. Chen Danyan’s criticism, however, seems to ignore the fact that preservation – typically entailing the ‘xintiandi-ing’ or gentrifying of the area – can arguably be regarded as yet another form of the production of copies of copies, which turns these buildings into equally empty signifiers of Shanghai identity. In this sense, the buildings, and even Chen’s \textit{Shanghai Trilogy} itself, arguably serve as memory-sites (\textit{lieux de mémoire}) in the purest sense:

One simple but decisive trait of \textit{lieux de mémoire} sets them apart from every type of history to which we have become accustomed, ancient or modern. Every previous historical or scientific approach to memory, whether national or social, has concerned itself with \textit{realia}, with things in themselves and in their immediate reality. Contrary to historical objects, however, \textit{lieux de mémoire}

\textsuperscript{148} Cf. Visser 2010a: 160 and Lu [Sheldon] 2007: 149. Lu further argues that Wang Jinsong’s work focuses on “the relentless forces of change and destruction as opposed to the wishes for continuity.”
\textsuperscript{149} Needless to say, like Shanghai, Beijing also knows voices who counter these nostalgic portrayals of daily life in the \textit{hutong} and \textit{siheyuan}, such as the writer Wang Shuo, who writes in “Against Alley Housing” 反胡同: “The alley was mostly made up of rundown houses... What joy was there to speak of? Every day people in the alley quarreled and cursed each other... For all I care, if all of Beijing’s alleys were to be flattened to the ground I wouldn’t be sorry for it” (cited in Braester 2010: 249).
have no referent in reality; or, rather, they are their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs. (Nora 1989: 17)

It is worthy of note that the *Shanghai Trilogy*’s portrayal of 1930s Shanghai as a reproducible image confirming the collective memory, rather than a depiction of a distinctive period in Shanghai’s history, contributed to its popularity, on the one hand, and triggered the critique of several scholars, on the other hand. Bao Yaming (2004a: 120), for example, writes:

[…] the prosperous, lavish and splendid old Shanghai becomes a timeless and ideal image with no beginning or ending in a non-historical context. The old Shanghai with no politically ideological touches or descriptions naturally becomes the target or object of people’s desire.

In addition, many readers “could not understand,” as Chen Danyan (2004) explains, “why these writings, instead of showing a critical attitude, gave expression to the mixed-blood nature of Shanghai culture, which was considered the shame of the nation.” Nevertheless, I would argue that despite the trilogy’s evident manifestation of Shanghai nostalgia, the books’ representation of the history of Shanghai is in fact more multilayered than appears at first sight.

For instance, Chen’s nostalgic portrayals of 1930s culture do not deny the darker sides of colonial domination either. Instead, the essays expose a similar strategy of bifurcating the ‘colonial West / Japan’ and the ‘metropolitan West / Japan’ (Shih 2001: 374) as does the novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, i.e. romanticizing cultural influences, while denouncing political oppression. In the essay “A Reason for Nostalgia,” for example, the narrator makes the following remark:

The children of today have not seen how the foreigners bullied the Chinese, neither have they seen how unfair the old society was. All they see is that the remaining old houses from that period are the most beautiful ones, and that the remaining bits and pieces from life at that time is the most delicate. When they grew up women did not wear perfume and men did not have to worry about whether their fingernails were clean or not. It was a period of material deprivation, when there were no fresh flowers on the streets.

The dilapidated, but exquisite architecture of this city is the reason for their nostalgia. (84)

The passage immediately reminds one of Wang Anyi’s (2001: 135 and 138-9) essay “Shanghai Style and Beijing Style” 上海味和北京味:

What is Shanghai? Four hundred years ago, it was still a desolate fishing village. With the first shot of the Opium War, they raised the white flag, after which the foreign gangsters came […] and later the vagabonds from the Chinese
countryside, who didn’t have a penny. [...] It was a deceitful world: businessmen, factory directors, and police officers in the foreign concessions, fully dependent on the underworld. [...]  

A lot of people, in particular the Shanghainese themselves, think that Shanghai used to be a very elegant city: Western houses and boulevards in the foreign concessions, huge buildings in classical style on the Bund, jazz music in sailors’ clubs, waiters wearing foreign clothes and speaking foreign languages in coffee bars… This European style did indeed give Shanghai a certain cachet. However, leaving aside the fact that it’s just superficial decoration, in the eyes of people from the ancient city of Beijing, they are out-and-out Europeans and Americans who have become plain vulgar.  

Apart from the much stronger tone by Wang Anyi, an important difference between these observations is that whereas Chen Danyan consistently focuses on the Western influences (albeit in this case the negative ones), Wang does not refrain from pointing out the role of the Shanghainese themselves as well. What is more, in the passage Chen observes a clear correlation between Shanghai citizens’ experiences in the Mao period and their nostalgia for 1930s Shanghai, which is in fact a major thread running through the *Shanghai Trilogy*.  

For this reason, it is important to note that whereas discussions of *Shanghai Memorabilia* predominantly focus on the collection’s theme of 1930s Shanghai, Shanghai nostalgia in this case is persistently related to the Mao period. In the above-mentioned “A Reason for Nostalgia,” for example, the narrator describes how a friend, “one of those young nostalgic Shanghai guys who are full of sadness for the hometown they never knew” (83), loves to ride his bike through the old quarters of town. After detailing the beauty of the fine ornaments of an old building behind the Bund, the narrator remarks that one can still tell the first inhabitants must have lived a life of luxury, and laments: “Standing there, you truly want to say from the bottom of your heart; what a wonderful life must people have had in the old days of Shanghai!” (82).  

She continues, however, with more sobering observations, and shows how a closer look actually exposes the scars of China’s recent history as well: the big collection of wonky mailboxes in all shapes and colors disorderly hanging on the wall makes it clear that these “good old days” ended with the victory of Communism. For, in the Mao period, people were not allowed to own their houses, and the Soviet concept of communal apartments was introduced. Rich families were driven out of their homes, and several families would move into what used to be single-family residences. So, like in “Aged Houses,” the essay highlights how in this building a dozen families are now living in the same space where only one rich family used to live. Accordingly, the narrator becomes increasingly low-spirited, and asserts:
It is only when you really walk into the building and sit inside, that you will smell the old days’ scents of oil, old wood, dust, food, urine from the small area next to the toilet that has accumulated over the years, and soap from the drain of the bathtub; that you will see how the lofty, carved ceiling has become an indistinguishable black and white, with dust filling the patterns like ears full of earwax; that you will notice that everywhere in the large kitchen strands are formed where the yellowish-brown color of oil fumes meets assembled dust, like the strings holding small ornaments in a Christmas tree…

Then, you will also truly want to say from the bottom of your heart: how can this house have become like this? (82-3)

In other words, whereas the refined architecture, ornaments, and furniture evoke romanticized memories of the old Shanghai, the building’s traces of neglect recall gloomy memories of Mao-era Shanghai, recalling the ruined longtang in part II of The Song of Everlasting Sorrow.

This is perhaps most pronounced in the section “Houses” 房屋 that contains four essays reconstructing Shanghai’s history by detailed depictions of the former homes of well-known Shanghaiese. In the essay on the Western-style apartment (with German elevator and private bathroom) where Shanghai’s most famous writer Zhang Ailing lived, for example, the narrator again relates how the communists would later confiscate the apartment to house several families. An even more prominent reminder of Mao-era Shanghai is the essay on the longtang in a quiet, dark alley behind Huaihai Road, where Jiang Qing escaped her abusive father and shared a room with a famous screenwriter and a famous director – “She wasted her body, dignity, and reputation as an instrument to become famous” (67) – before she would marry Mao Zedong and eventually become a member of the notorious “Gang of Four.”

A final example is the essay on the large, new-style longtang (宽敞的大弄堂) of the artist Yan Wenliang 颜文樑 (1893-1990), about which the narrator notes, while entering the longtang:

An old, glass hood lamp hangs in the hall, shaped like a golden lily in reverse, with a slightly rusted iron ring, reminding one of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century and the new artistic lightning decorations which had survived Paris’ bloodshed. But this lamp had not been brought back from Paris by Yan Wenliang. The year he came back from Paris, Yan Wenliang had taken with him more than ten thousand art books and more than five hundred Academy-style replicas of European sculptures. (52)

Yan Wenliang’s apartment is filled with European furniture, books, mirrors, utensils, tableware, pottery, and art works, which (as the narrator tells us) have either survived the Cultural Revolution, or which he bought in second-hand shops in the 1980s. While describing each item in the apartment, the narrator also recounts
how, in name of the ‘destroy the four olds’- campaign during the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards had smashed Yan’s imported European sculptures into pieces. The essay ends with the narrator wondering how it is possible that an old padlock on the glass door of a carved cabinet survived the Cultural Revolution.

Again, the apartment of Yan Wenliang appears to be not so much the topic of the essay, but rather a means to rewrite the history of Shanghai and expose the destruction caused by the Cultural Revolution. Even more to the point, although each essay has a ‘Shanghai memorabilia’ as its subject, “the shadow of the Cultural Revolution,” as Chen (2004)\(^{150}\) says about her own work, still hangs over the collection. In view of that, the old buildings merely serve as spokespersons of the last ‘living’ witnesses, who experienced the semi-colonial as well as the Mao period.

In her essay “One Who Grew up Drinking Wolf Milk and Her Writing,” Chen Danyan (2004; original in English, italics added) explains how her fascination with the Cultural Revolution and with the old Shanghai is directly linked to her motivation for becoming an author:

> On my first day in primary school, the first sentence I heard at the opening ceremony was, “Boys and girls, the Cultural Revolution has begun.” […] As the youngest child of the family at the time, I was only told to stay at home and not to mention to anyone anything about my family. Very often at supper my brothers would talk at the table about what was happening in their lives. Sometimes they would stop all of [a] sudden and look at me, for they noticed me and took care not to let me know certain things. […] What happened [at] the dinner table at home thus shaped my attitude toward the world around me: I believed an immense world of truth was concealed from me so that I would not be hurt by it and so that I could not tell others about it.

> Thus it became my dream to discover the hidden and unspoken with my own eyes. […] In 1966, Shanghai went through the Cultural Revolution, [it] reopened to the world in 1978 and, since 1983, [it] has begun the transformation from planned economy to market economy. This is a city which has witnessed significant historical transformations and is permeated with stories and meaning, like an old [person] 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. […] Starting with my childhood memory at the dinner table, I have questioned everything and will not believe any demonized depiction of the city of Shanghai in traditional Chinese urban literature. Instead of studying the city and classifying human beings with Mao Zedong’s methods of class analysis and

\(^{150}\) Chen Danyan (2004): “Of the many books that I have written, there are two signal features in most of them: the general context of the City of Shanghai and the shadow of the Cultural Revolution.”
thus working with prejudices in mind, I wish to uncover all the concealed facts and tell others about them. I am writing for the unacknowledged truth. [...] The city I depict is one stained with original sin under the shadow of colonialisat practice on the route of the East Indian Company in the 19th century. Hence, my writings are stained with this original sin as well.

To Chen Danyan, then, writing about the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and the dubious allure of the semi-colonial period is doing retrospective justice; it constitutes the truthful “uncovering” of “all the concealed facts,” as both periods are still sensitive and contested subjects in China. There is, however, a distinction to be made: whereas both figure in Shanghai’s collective memory, the Cultural Revolution is also a prominent object of Chen’s personal memory. This crucial difference comes even more to the fore in the short story I will discuss in the following paragraph.

**Restoration or Occupation? Or: Who Has the Right to Speak for Shanghai?**

When you walk into a building on the Bund, the noise of the embankment is suddenly cut short by the door; illuminated by the rays of the hallway lights, the building’s atmosphere wraps around you, and you immediately fall into another time and space, into a disorientating trance. Perhaps this is a kind of tranquillizing trance which makes people feel they can disguise themselves as another person; as if your body is being pushed up by rapidly rising waters and you instinctively move your legs and arms to make you float. All kinds of relics from the Bund’s glorious old times are floating beside you, like the shrimps and seaweed swept ashore after a storm, or the greasy oil left from a steamship, suspicious slippers, and broken planks covered with moss. And then both pleasant surprise and repulsion mingle in your heart.


“Black-and-White Mosaic,” was first published in 2006, in *Shanghai Literature*, and republished as the opening story of *Images and Legends of the Bund* (2008). The story is set in a neo-classical building on the Bund, designed in 1923 by the British architectural firm of Palmer & Turner to house the Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China. The story jumps back and forth between a childhood memory of 1966 and its actual setting in 2006, two years after the building had undergone a drastic renovation and was reopened as Bund 18, housing several luxury shops, high-end restaurants, and art galleries.\(^{151}\)

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\(^{151}\) The restoration of the building received a lot of media attention and triggered several debates on whether the building should be entirely restored into its original condition. After an extensive research on the building’s history, a team of Venetian architects from Kokai Studio renovated the building for which they won the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation.
Narrated from the perspective of the mother, “Black-and-White Mosaic” tells the story of a mother and daughter who visit an exhibition at Bund 18 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the sister-city relationship of Hamburg and Shanghai. While entering the building, the mother notices the marble columns “purchased from churches in Italy” and the huge Marilyn chandelier “reminiscent of ancient Venetian glassware” and “studded with gold filaments,” also imported from Italy. When the mother looks down at the old restored mosaic floor – “with traces of the meticulous handiwork done in the 1920s” –, she is “filled with nostalgia” (26).

Though one might at first think that the detailed descriptions of the luxuriously handcrafted ornaments betray a yearning for the building’s heyday, the mother actually recalls a childhood experience from a day in 1966, when she was six years old and visited her father at his work as Party Secretary of the Chinese-Polish Joint Stock Shipping Company (which had its head office there from 1962 until 1991). On that day she waited for her father, while playing “on his English typewriter on the oversized desk” in the office that was “pervaded by a mixture of coffee, cologne, and tobacco’ smells” and that contained a small changing room with an “Yves Saint Laurent trunk, big enough to hang several well-pressed suits and shirts”… The experience reveals that the Mao period hadn’t fully erased the building’s colonial history - even its smells persisted. Moreover, it strikingly shows how even a personal memory from 1966 can still be colored by the collective memory of 1930s Shanghai, which becomes also evident in the passage when the mother recalls what the Bund looked like in her childhood:

There were no more children beggars as there had been before 1949, although skinny neighborhood rascals still hung around, jumping into the river and swimming in their blue shorts. There were no more foreign currency peddlars with silver dollars jingling in their pockets, and no more women with tight fitting dresses splitting at their hips. […] There were no more Sikh policemen or half-naked rickshaw coolies. The rickshaws, which were synonymous with the old Shanghai, had given way to pedicabs. You no longer heard a dozen foreign languages ringing in your ears, as only Russian was taught in the schools of Shanghai. (29)

So, whereas one would expect the mother to compare the Bund of her childhood with the Bund today – two periods she bodily experienced – she compares it with a period long before her birth in 1960 instead.

There follows a long passage, describing how the girl searches for her father in the huge building, until she recognizes his muffled voice amidst strange noises coming from behind a door. The girl fears he is involved in some forbidden conspiracy and spontaneously opens the door to an empty room where she sees her father’s coat lying on a sofa and a picture of a European man in a frame exactly like one her father once gave her. Even more frightened, the girl runs through the
building where she bumps into Lara, the Polish secretary of the Shipping Company, who behaves very strangely. When the girl finally finds her way back to her father’s office, the room feels haunted, and she notices suspicious stains on the carpet and that the furniture has changed into uncanny shapes. Standing there, the girl is startled by the sudden, resounding chime of the big Customs House bell, playing ‘The East is Red’, the popular song praising Mao Zedong which was played all over China during the Cultural Revolution: \(^{152}\)

\[
\text{It sounded as if a lion had woken up, its deafening roar rattling the window-panes. The girl was afraid the entire building would collapse; just crumble down like in an earthquake. (27)}
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Interestingly, in both Wang Anyi’s and Chen Danyan’s story the narrator is struck by the intrusive sound of Shanghai’s Customs House bell, whose chime changed with the city’s change of power.

The mother’s memory ends with the father coming in and the girl falling into his arms, crying. Although everything is told from the perspective of a six-year-old child who does not understand what is going on, any Chinese reader will immediately recognize the atmosphere of anxiety and suspicion that marked the Cultural Revolution. This atmosphere is not just reflected in the girl’s paranoid thoughts about her father, but also, metaphorically, in her terrifying experiences of the labyrinth-like building and eerily shaking office. However frightening the account may be, the narrator remarks that “the reassuring familiarity of the little details of the past gives the mother the feeling of coming home.” Likewise, when the mother suddenly hears the sound of the Customs House’s bell playing the same ‘The East is Red’-tune as in her childhood, “with the chime ringing out of tune at the same point as before,” this “familiar error” awakens her from her reverie. In other words, no matter how unsettling the horror or dissonant the “error,” the fact that these are her childhood memories is enough to make the mother feel at home, a feeling she does not have in her present environment:

The mother was standing in the middle of her father’s old office. “Look, I recognize that window,” she said to her daughter. But deep inside she was actually not sure at all if this was really the same big window she remembered. Through it, she could see Pudong’s glittering skyscrapers, covered with flickering neon lights and advertisements for Japanese electronics. […] The flourishing land across the Huangpu River was now witnessing the same boom as the old Bund in the 1920s. […] An all-embracing drive towards the future swept the city again.

\(^{152}\) The lyrics of the first verse, in Xing Lu’s translation, are: The East is red; the sun rises. / China has got a Mao Zedong. / He seeks happiness for the people / and he is the people’s savior. The melody was taken from a folk song from Shaanxi Province (Lu [Xing] 2004: 101).
The strange window did not seem to be part of that outside world; but neither did it seem a part of the building’s interior or exterior; just like the mother herself. (29)

Feeling “disoriented” and “confused by the gap between her memory and reality,” the mother anxiously searches for references to her father’s company in the exhibition. However, she then notices that the exhibition only mentions the building’s history before 1949 and after China’s opening-up in the 1980s. Somewhat insulted, the mother tells a young woman working at the exhibition that the room used to be her father’s office, after which a telling conversation ensues:

“So your father worked in the bank. I’ve heard this used to be the tycoon’s office,” the girl said with curiosity in her voice.

“No, no, my father was a Party Secretary, not a tycoon! I sure hope I don’t look old enough to be born before 1949?” the mother replied.

“Of course not, I am a little confused.” […]

“When I was a child, this used to be an office of the Chinese-Polish Shipping Company.” […]

“So the Party Secretary occupied the tycoon’s office,” the girl said.

“Although the mother sensed the humor in the remark, she was also annoyed, and said: ‘Or you could say that the VIP room today occupies the Party Secretary’s office.’

“This is not a matter of occupation, but of restoration. The building is restored to what it looked like a hundred years ago.”

“A hundred years ago it was 1906 and this building had not even been built then. If you’re talking about restoration, it should be restored in the style of the East India Company [after Shanghai was forced to open as a treaty port, the East India Company started building the first wharf which would develop into the Bund], not like this,” the mother hit back, but without understanding her own logic.

She was stuck in the morass of Shanghai’s most problematic issue: who has the right to speak for Shanghai? (32)

It is precisely this last question that brings us to the heart of Shanghai nostalgia: not only whose, but also which purportedly ‘collective’ memory is this all about? In addition, the story shows that it is not only our memory that is colored by past experience, but also our perception of the world today. As in The Song of Everlasting Sorrow (“In Wang Qiyao’s perspective, Weiwei had a warped view of Shanghai” (299)), this becomes particularly evident in the lack of understanding between mother and daughter, at the end of the story:

“Have a look at my pictures,” the daughter said, showing her mother the little screen on her digital camera. […] One of the pictures showed the roof garden of
the Peace Hotel […] reminding her of a nineteenth-century picture she had once seen, with a plump European woman, a tropical pine tree, and men with white sun hats. The image that popped up in her mind felt like a déjá-vu, a scene taken straight from her memory. But the picture on the screen of her daughter’s camera was completely different, the roof garden looked more like a watermelon. […] “Why don’t you just observe with your eyes, instead of through a small lens of your camera?” she asked agitatedly. “Because it is only through a tiny little gap that we can see the real world,” her daughter replied.

Chen Danyan’s *Shanghai Trilogy*, conclusively, is a collection of essays, jottings, legends and short stories on the city of Shanghai placed in Abbas’ “triple historical framework”: reviving romantic dreams of the city as Treaty Port and scary nightmares of the city under Mao, while expressing both fear and hope on Shanghai’s present condition.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Since the 1990s, Shanghai nostalgia has permeated Chinese media and culture. The works discussed in this chapter not only reflect this nostalgia, but – considering their huge popularity – also played a role in transmitting and reinforcing the sentiment. Placing Shanghai’s most prominent colonial legacy, i.e. the old buildings, center stage appears to be one of the means by which this is effected.

One could claim that the exhaustive documentation – in text and photographs – of the architecture and interiors of these buildings, affectionately detailing each ornament, and even reconstructing the lives of its former inhabitants, turned these works into a literary form of architectural restoration and preservation. Accordingly, the works reveal dilemmas similar to those of Shanghai’s real-life restoration projects: how to restore these buildings, both literary and figuratively, and revive the cosmopolitan splendor they are associated with, but without ‘restoring’ negative associations, such as colonial power and national humiliation? Moreover, since the buildings are restored to their original, pre-Mao condition, their preservation seems as much to foster the collective memory of old Shanghai as to further a collective amnesia of Mao-era Shanghai.

A close reading of Wang Anyi’s novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* and Chen Danyan’s trilogies on Shanghai shows that the works by both authors reveal a critical attitude towards colonial oppression as embodied in the buildings on the Bund and, simultaneously, an uneasiness with the city’s newly-built high-rises, “copies-of-copies” in the words of Chen’s narrator and “lacking a heart” in the words of Wang’s. Furthermore, the Mao period is fully present, though indirectly, in the buildings’ traces of destruction and neglect: Collective memory and individual memory do not necessarily coincide, and lived history is impossible to suppress.
Besides these similarities, however, the works show Shanghai nostalgia at work in two very distinct ways. Chen Danyan’s trilogies are a prime example of restorative nostalgia, reflecting and expressing a desire for the reestablishment of the cosmopolitan city of global importance, with its imagined ‘authentic’ 1930s life and culture. Wang Anyi’s *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, in contrast, breathes a reflective nostalgia and expresses an escapist longing for a remote past, whether this is the glamorous early years of the fictional Wang Qiyao or the *longtang* childhood of the author Wang Anyi herself. Hence, written in the middle of Shanghai’s urban renewal craze, Wang’s work fixes its gaze on the crumbling *longtang* behind the Bund, while the buildings on the grand boulevard in Chen’s work mirror glittering Pudong in their windows.