5

ESCAPE

OUT OF AND INTO VARIOUS PLACES ‘REAL’ AND IMAGINED

Figure 5-1 Jin Haishu’s Deep Anxiety (left; design by Ou Ning 欧宁), Mian Mian’s Candy and Panda.

One Afternoon’s Assorted Emotions 一个下午的零碎感受

each and every event speeds away from us
the room is cramped
and we are confined within it
all we can do is watch, like we were sitting on
some unique planet
that didn’t move and that made us sit still with it
when an apple
drops from your hand in an instant of carelessness
we are both shocked, seeing it as an omen
perhaps it’s the truth
that we’ll both wind up like this:
two people abandoned by everything
there’s something special about this feeling
of being shut in, of being under some kind of curse
outside time and velocity
our feet become things of no use
this afternoon drags on—the one thing we are capable of doing
is to wait as the world screams on its way
with autumn once more outside our window

Jin Haishu 金海曙 (2005; translation by Simon Patton)

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Sometimes I need to leave the surface of the earth, sometimes I need to be full of love for the entire world, I need some ecstasy [...] 

This candy-coated city, blurred but seductive, where the speed of the car controls my mood and heartbeat. When he speeds up, I feel good, but when it’s more than I can take, he slows down. The taxi driver puts on the music I brought with me, the elevated highway becomes soft, and my eyes stand up, and my eyes lie down. Warm and gentle sparks embrace the emptiness; when the music plays and the bloodred pipes in my head begin to melt, I feel myself stepping into another skin.

I’ve decided to go to China Groove on weekend nights.

Mian Mian, in Candy (2003: 207)

While in Jin Haishu’s poem, the lyric subject and her/his lover are locked into their room, waiting “as the world screams on its way” outside their window, the protagonist in Mian Mian’s Candy is in the midst of that very dazzling world outside, as she speeds over the elevated highway to yet another nightclub. Whereas Jin Haishu’s lyrical subject sits still and gets a special feeling of being “under some kind of curse outside time and velocity,” Mian Mian’s feels that the speed of the car controls her mood and heartbeat. Thus, these two passages show characters responding in markedly different ways to a city on the move.

However, these responses also have something in common: both reveal an inner desire or need to escape from daily life in the outside world. One, in a state of shock, passively finds refuge in the confinement of a room that serves as “some unique planet”; the other, in a state of ecstasy, actively seeks refuge in Shanghai’s thrilling nightlife, enabling her to “leave the surface of the earth” and then feel love for the world she usually condemns. In short, their places of retreat are opposite: the enclosed private space of Jin’s “abandoned” characters is “cramped,” while the open public space Mian Mian’s character freely lets herself be absorbed by is described as “soft,” “warm,” and “gentle.”

The above two passages are representative of Mian Mian’s and Jin Haishu’s literary works, which both depict the lives of prostitutes, substance addicts, immigrants, thieves, homeless people, and the unemployed, who are struggling with either inability or unwillingness to adapt to mainstream society. Feeling lost and confused, their characters often attempt to escape from the pressing realities of the rapidly changing city. The ways of escape and the places into which the characters escape are the subject of the present chapter.

After introducing Mian Mian and Jin Haishu, I will briefly discuss urban transformation in relation to the notion of escape. Since Mian Mian’s characters tend to escape into the public places, whereas Jin Haishu’s do so into private ones, I will first discuss public space in Mian Mian’s work, and then private space in Jin

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All quotes in this chapter come from Andrea Lingenfelter’s excellent translation (2003). For the research of this chapter, I used Mian Mian 2000.
Haishu’s work. After that, I will focus on the bathroom as recurrent literary locus of refuge, to end with some concluding remarks.

**Mian Mian and Jin Haishu: Life and Works**

**Mian Mian**

"That’s not me!” Mian Mian exclaims when – in a public interview in the Rotterdam Art Center in 2011 – curator Monika Szewczyk points at the cover of the German translation of (parts of) *Candy*. The cover shows the picture of a girl: with one nude leg crossed over the other, she sits on a grand bed and looks over a pair of John Lennon-style sunglasses into the camera. A vulnerable and sad expression on her face, or is it ennui? No make-up, short messy hair as if she has just woken up, even though broad daylight shines through the big bay window. She wears a white diaphanous nightdress with flower print, exposing her breasts, and a big headphone hangs around her neck. Through the wet window, one can see a newly built apartment block. Even though the picture has been taken more than ten years ago, the audience in Rotterdam can clearly recognize the girl on the picture is in fact the same person as the woman that is now shaking her head: “no, that’s not me, that’s really not me.”

The picture and Mian Mian’s response are telling. Whereas Mian Mian’s eyes on the picture are partly hidden behind the dark sunglasses, she reveals her body; while Mian Mian is very open about her sex life, she never wants to reveal much about her inner life; after Mian Mian peremptorily tells the Rotterdam audience that her novels are autobiographical, she mystifyingly adds that its characters are always fictional. The big headphone on the picture alludes to Mian Mian’s reputation as the ‘Shanghai night queen’ or the ‘queen of subculture’: ever since the end of the 1990s, Mian Mian has been known as hosting huge rave and house parties. Together with the famous British DJ Paul Oakenfold, for example, she organized the Great Wall Party (in the middle of the SARS virus scare), attracting 1500 people.

Mian Mian was born as Wang Shen 王莘 in Shanghai in 1970. At sixteen, she started writing and publishing short stories in literary magazines. In the same year, she dropped out of high school and went alone to Shenzhen. There she quit writing, and sang in bars and started using heroin. Her father brought her back to Shanghai and made her enter a rehab program in 1995. Here, she started writing again and worked as a DJ at one of Shanghai’s best-known jazz-and-blues venues, the Cotton Club.
After the runaway success of her first book, the story collection *La La La* published in Hong Kong, Mian Mian used this collection as the basis for her first novel *Candy* (2000). The explicit descriptions of sex, drugs, prostitution, AIDS, and suicide caused *La La La* and *Candy* to be banned by the Chinese government. It is even said that the then president Jiang Zemin personally recited controversial passages containing sex to the Politburo (Napack 2001). However, within a short period after the ban, around eight pirated versions of *Candy* circulated in China. The ban only increased Mian Mian’s popularity in China and abroad, and gave her a certain cult status.

*Candy* has been translated into fifteen languages, and was a bestseller in China and France. The novel was quickly followed by two collections of short stories: *Every Good Kid Deserves Candy* 每个好孩子都有糖吃 and *Acid Lover* 盐酸情人. Mian Mian has written columns on music, love and relationships for a Hong Kong newspaper, which were collected in one volume in 2002: *Social Dance* 社交舞. In 2004, she published a novel with two titles on the cover: *Panda* 熊猫 in Chinese and *Panda Sex* in English. The novel was translated into French (2005) and German (2009), and *China Daily* (1 March 2005) concluded that Mian Mian had “reached maturity”:

> The whimsically titled *Panda Sex*, which refers to the characters’ perilously inactive mating habits similar to those of the notoriously sex-shy bear, has also won the tacit approval of the authorities.


In 2009, the government lifted the ban on *Candy*, and in the same year Zhenhai Publishers 珍海出版社 published a reprint of *Candy*, a rewritten version of *Panda* under the title *Notorious* 声名狼藉, the stories collection *Your Night, My Day* 你的黑夜我的白天, and a collection of diary notes and emails entitled *On High* [sic] in *Blue Tomorrows* 于忧郁的明天升山天空. The four books were sold and vigorously promoted by the Shanghai Book City 上海书城, the biggest book store of Shanghai whose mainstream image turned out to have a negative impact on Mian Mian’s cult status. 155 For this reason, the Culture and Art Publishing House 文艺出版社 published another rewritten version of *Panda* (2010), including color pictures and a CD with two songs and a reading of the last chapter by the poet sound artists and poet Yan Jun 颜峻 (b. 1973), together with the collection of personal jottings *Vanity is an Elegant Flower Adorning Young People* 虚荣是年轻人佩带的一朵幽雅的花, including a CD with Mian Mian’s favorite ‘Chinese Indie Rock’ music.

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154 All English titles of Mian Mian’s books mentioned in this chapter, are her owns. Some are printed on the covers of the Chinese editions, others can be found on her weblog blog.sina.com.cn/mianmian.
155 During my fieldwork in Shanghai in 2010, several readers and scholars asserted that they believed the promotion by *Shanghai Book City* to be counterproductive.
Besides fiction and music, Mian Mian is involved in many different cultural projects. She wrote the screenplay for *Shanghai Panic* 我们害怕 (2002), in which she acts as well, and she has plans to make more movies based on her work. Furthermore, she initiated several art exhibitions, and one of her latest project is the arts program *Every good kid deserves candy*:

Through the discovery, creation, collection and promotion of artworks by the newest and edgier of China’s contemporary artists, the goal of the Project is to reflect the limitless scope and potential possessed by China’s unique, striking and inspiring new generation of artists. (www.everygoodkiddeservescandy.com)

Mian Mian and Weihui’s works are almost always discussed together – mostly in the framework of the Post-1970s, Beauty Writers, Bad Girl Writers, or Body Writers – disregarding their different styles. As Chen Sihe 陈思和 (2000: 166) writes:

The reason why they are always selected together for discussion is because 1990s Shanghai permeates the lives and works of both. In discussing them, Shanghai is presented as the symbol and type of an international metropolis under construction. In this respect, Mian Mian and Weihui have indeed a lot in common. However, when we consider the way they express their personality and world-view, these writers are in fact quite different.

Another reason for the persistent association of Mian Mian’s work with Weihui’s is their notorious public ‘catfight’ over alleged plagiarism after subsequent publication of Mian Mian’s *La, La, La* and Weihui’s *Shanghai Babe* (Scheen 2006a: 12). Since both novels revolve around Shanghai’s nightlife, sex, drugs, and a desperate search for love, Mian Mian accused Weihui of stealing the concept of her novel. Rumors even speak of Mian Mian pouring beer on Weihui’s head in a Shanghai bar and mutual threats on the Internet (Farrer 2002: 30 and Melvin 2000).

After the journal *Reading Guide* 阅读导刊 (8 April 2000) published an article that compared certain passages from both novels, confirming Mian Mian’s allegation, the battle escalated into a sensationalist public debate, particularly on the Internet. The website NetEase, for example, opened a forum under the title “Wei Hui / Mian Mian: who started it?,” receiving thousands of posts in response, within one week. As was to be expected, readers, scholars, and the authors themselves focused on personal, instead of textual, arguments, as also revealed by Zhu’s ([Aijun] 2007: 148) fierce defence of Weihui:

This debate of authenticity continues its attack on Wei Hui herself in Mian Mian’s shallow article “Wei Hui Did Not Copy Me” […] Mian Mian fills her article with “authentic” holier-than-thou snobbery against anyone from outside Shanghai, a cultural legacy considered typical to Shanghaiese as a result of its history as a colonial metropolitan. Thus Mian Mian speaks with the authority of
an “authentic” Shanghai resident that “Wei Hui is not a Shanghai resident at all ...
... It seems that Wei Hui hates Shanghai people.” [...] Therefore, unlike the real
Shanghai baby who is always up-to-date with the ever changing international
fashion, Wei Hui, along with her heroine, is really a little country bum who does
not know about class or the Western customs since she does not know that
chocolate has different colors and that “rich people in the West eat chocolate
very carefully” in order to “protect their teeth.”

The sensation only increased the sales of Candy and Shanghai Babe, as “a key result
of the battle of the bad-girl writers,” in the words of Shelley Chan (2010: 60), “has
been to promote the sale of their books due to readers’ curiosity about what the fuss
is all about.”

In recent years, however, the works of Mian Mian are no longer solely discussed
in relation to Weihui’s, and several studies on the history of Shanghai literature,
such as Chen Qingsheng’s 陈青生 Painting Shanghai Literature (2009), include
Mian Mian, but not Weihui.\(^{156}\)

**Jin Haishu**

The characters in my novels not only feel anxious in society, but also in their
homes. The home does not provide them with any solutions to problems and the
objects in their home feel unfamiliar. For example, if you have a table that you
like and you live with it for more than ten years, then you can build a
relationship with that table. However, till this day, I have not been able to write
on the things with which I have built such an intimate relationship. Until now,
the relationship to the world has been like this in my literary works. I admit that,
my work is in fact rather negative. And in the end, a literary work does
represent the author, which is in this case an author who resists the world and
doesn’t like it. Why is he not able to build up a relationship with the world?
Because he doesn’t like it, including the home he doesn’t like. It is a very
negative mood, but I have actually changed since then. The things I wrote later
are not as extreme anymore; maybe I’ve become more amicable to the world,
more amicable to this table. Why should I hate this table so much? I should be
nicer to this table.

Interview with Jin Haishu, in Beijing in December 2008

Old Jin 老金, as his friends call him, does not understand why I want to interview
him on his short stories collection Deep Anxiety 深度焦虑: “I wrote those stories
such a long time ago, I was not very mature at the time and most stories are poorly

\(^{156}\) In comparison: in the Dictionary of Contemporary Shanghai Writers 当代上海作家词典 (2004),
Weihui is still included, and not Mian Mian, while in the two-volume standard work A History of
Shanghai Literature 上海文学通史 (2005) Weihui and Mian Mian are still mentioned together.
written.” Whether the question concerns his work or his personal life, Jin’s modest answers all betray a certain outsider’s perspective, revealing a similar distance Jin observes in his own work between the fictional characters and the world.

Jin Haishu was born in Shanghai in 1961. He started writing poetry in high school, under the pseudonym A’nai 阿奈, formed by two characters from the Chinese transliteration of the name of the French poet and writer Guillaume Apollinaire (阿波利奈尔, 1880-1918). In 1982, Jin graduated in philosophy from Xiamen University, after which he went to Fuzhou where he had to live with his parents, because of a housing shortage. When a friend invited him to come to Japan, he jumped at the opportunity. In Japan, Jin did an MA in literature at Osaka University of Foreign Studies in 1995, whereupon he returned to China. In 1996, he won the ¥ 10,000 Anne-Kao Poetry Prize 刘丽安诗歌奖.

Back in China, Jin wrote his first short stories, mostly based on his experiences in Japan. According to the writer and filmmaker Zhu Wen (1999: 2), Jin “led a wild life of drinking and chasing women.” In 1999, Jin published his collection of short stories Deep Anxiety. In 2003, he published a novel and a play, both called The Orphan of Zhao 赵氏孤儿 and inspired on the original version by Ji Junxiang 纪君祥 (772-846), a classic play from the Yuan Dynasty. After the play was successfully staged in Beijing (2003), it received much attention and was short-listed for the 2004 Cao Yu Drama Prize 曹禺戏剧奖.

Jin has translated many Japanese novels, including works by Nobel Prize winner Kawabata Yasunari. In addition, he acted in the movie Seafood 海鲜 (2001), written and directed by Zhu Wen.

At this writing, Jin Haishu lives in Beijing. He teaches at Peking University and works as freelance writer for television stations.

**Transformation and the Notion of Escape**

Old Dragon Lutetia [former Roman name for Paris] is dead; no more anarchic Streets running freely and coarsely With frontages teetering under their gables, Inspiring a Rembrandt, at sunset, to meditate in the dark crannies; No more caprices; no more wandering byways Where Molière once confronted Géronte with Léandre; Alignment – that’s the operative word at present. Paris, riddled from head to foot by your dueling, has Got fifteen or twenty new streets straight through the Body, plus barracks to boot (most convenient); Boulevards, Squares, with your monicker on their cockades, All of them clearly foreshadowing cannonballs; [...]
Old Paris has now turned into one whole everlasting Throroughfare stretching its limbs, as pretty and neat as the letter I Saying: “Rivoli! Rivoli! Rivoli!”

Victor Hugo (1869), Paris “Embellished”
(translation by E.H. and A.M Blackmore 2001: 563 and 565)

Like the Parisians experienced during the Haussmann period, when a city is transformed over a decade and, on top of that, under an authoritarian regime, its citizens are reduced to sometimes bewildered spectators. Baron Haussmann (1809-1891) was hired by Napoleon III in 1852 to rebuild Paris from a medieval city of densely crowded quarters with narrow alleyways into a modern city with wide avenues and boulevards, expansive gardens and parks. The project took only eighteen years (1852-1870) and was fiercely criticized by many contemporaries, but is nowadays mostly praised for the achievement of transforming the city into a model of modern urban planning.

The striking similarities with Shanghai’s transformation are worth noticing. Apart from the short time span and the similar urban plan of these two cities, the involvement of the central government in both Paris and Shanghai had side effects that are often overlooked. Both the French and Chinese governments use(d) renewal projects to enforce their power: for example, Haussmanns’ preference for broad streets over small alleys was said to be motivated by a desire to have better control over the Paris citizenry. Likewise, the renovation of Shanghai’s old longtang neighborhoods is not only about cultural preservation, but also has many politically and economically motivated facets (selling Shanghai’s urban renewal plans to foreign investors as well as to its own citizens), as discussed in the previous chapter.

In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that Shanghai is still run by “an interventionist, control-oriented bureaucracy that is tightly linked to the central government in Beijing,” in the words of Pamela Yatsko (2003: 295), whose “primary function [it is] to ensure social stability.” So, even though most residents are in general agreement with the city’s modernization drive, all changes have in fact been imposed on them from above, reinforcing a sense of powerlessness which is among the distinguishing features of urban experience already. As Yi-Fu Tuan (1974: 248) puts it, the urban environment is “a given fact irreducible to particular human needs”:

Only over a small part of the city do people feel they have control. Their own homes may express their personalities, the places they work if these are small, privately-owned, and perhaps the neighborhood street if it is the scene of informal socializing.

In his influential study The Fall of Public Man, Richard Sennett (1977) has shown how the uncertainty and instability of city life encourages a retreat into the private
realm of family and friends. In particular the home represents an independent, separate environment where people can rest and recharge and express their individuality. “The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace,” as Gaston Bachelard (1994: 6) famously has it. The previous chapter also demonstrated this through Wang Anyi’s *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, where the *longtang*-houses shield Wang Qiyao from the political turmoil of the outside world.

In Shanghai a growing number of people can afford to buy apartments, which was practically impossible in the Mao era, and before 1949 a luxury only reserved for the very rich. Today, everywhere in Shanghai, huge housing advertisements show happy families in sparkling, newly built apartments. As Hanlong Lu (2000: 134-6) remarks:

In the mid-1990s Shanghai urban residents spent about 10 percent of their total household budgets on household equipment, goods, and services. Their spending on durable goods, bedclothes, and household sundries has always led the nation. […] ‘All-in-one’ housing units – that is, self-contained apartments with their own entrance, private bath, and kitchen – have become the norm in new buildings and the standard in most renovations. By 1996, 60 percent of Shanghai families were living in such units, more than double the number just four years earlier. As a result, urban residents have more space and comfort in their homes and also enjoy greater privacy.

Wider access to home ownership has thus also created new spaces of privacy and individuality, and, as *Shanghai Daily* quotes a sociology professor from Fudan University: “after being silent [on privacy] for so many years, Chinese people tend to the other extreme, which leads to excessive privacy” (cited in Pow 2009: 82). In Jin Haishu’s fiction this is reflected in the recurrence of the home as a place of retreat, shielding the protagonist from an outside world that is mostly depicted as a place of hostility and menace. In a short story discussed below, “Bathing” 洗澡, for example, the protagonist eventually escapes inward by buying a house and designing his own bathroom.

Although the characters in Mian Mian’s work cannot find fulfillment in the brave new world of transforming Shanghai either, they do not seek refuge in traditional private spaces. In contrast to Jin’s characters, they prefer the underground world of bars, discotheques and nightclubs. Nevertheless, these places offer the characters an equivalent space to express themselves and enjoy a certain freedom they cannot find in everyday life. For this reason, I would argue that these public venues could be seen as the counterparts to the private home.

Nightlife seems to promise intimacy and mystery, immersing the characters into a shadow world. As Farrer (2002: 293) remarks in his study on Shanghai youth (sex) culture:
By ‘creating a virtual world of time and space,’ dance allows a playful self-presentation outside of the obligations of everyday life. The dance hall deliberately distorts everyday appearances. The darkness in social dance halls creates anonymity and diminishes flaws in appearance.

Farrer describes in this work how nightlife arose in Shanghai with the introduction of streetlights powered by gas, which in China was first introduced in Shanghai at the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1920s, the first Western-style dance halls opened in Shanghai; they proliferated even throughout the Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945) and the early 1950s (Farrer 2002: 294). During the anti-rightist campaigns of the late 1950s, however, nightlife was banned in Shanghai as a “bourgeois” practice. From then on, all forms of nightlife disappeared, except for the secret, “lights-out dance parties” depicted in Chen Danyan and Wang Anyi’s stories. In 1981, the first public dances at neighborhood cultural centers were organized, and the first commercial dance halls opened in 1984 (Farrer 2002: 295). In the 1990s the number of discotheques increased exponentially. Doomed to Live in Confusion: Mian Mian’s and Jin Haishu’s Characters

The characters in the novels under discussion appear to have much in common. They play no clear, conventional public role in society; they are unemployed, unmarried, and restless move from place to place. They feel lonely and depressed. As uprooted, wandering individuals they either desperately search for love or meaning, or give in to exhaustion and ennui. Mian Mian’s character Apple, in Candy, expresses this in an exemplary way when he laments: “We are condemned to solitude, doomed to live in confusion, and nothing we’ve done so far has been able to resolve our yearning” (257). They experience their meaningless existence as insurmountable and escape seems to be the only way to live with a modicum of enjoyment.

Notably, their escape always remains within the city’s confines. They never venture outside to, for example, the countryside, which was the preferred route in pre-1990 Chinese literature, such as in 1980s Root-Seeking novels by Wang Anyi, Mo Yan 莫言 (b. 1955), and Han Shaogong. The few times they leave Shanghai, it is always for another big city, like Shenzhen, Beijing, or Tokyo. It shows once again that in the characters’ consciousness there is no other environment than the urban, and that tradition and the countryside are no longer viable options for escape.

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Farrer 2002: 291: “According to counts by the Ministry of Culture, the number of commercial dance halls in Shanghai rose from 52 in 1985, to 310 in 1990, to 1,347 (of which at least ten multi-level disco plaza’s) in 1996.” The colloquial term “dance hall” (舞厅), Farrer uses in his study, “includes discotheques, social dance halls, nightclubs, and song-and-dance halls, but excludes karaoke halls, which are often also places for business negotiations or prostitution” (296).
**Mian Mian: Escape into the Crowd**

*Candy* is a semi-autobiographical account, set in the gritty underground world of Shenzhen and Shanghai between the years 1992 and 1999, and revolving around the lives of the character Hong and her lovers and friends. After the first publication of *Candy*, Mian Mian revised the novel for translation into English and Dutch, among other languages. In personal conversations, she has given different motivations for these revisions. Initially, she said she wanted to adapt the novel for the Western reader, while later claiming the only reason was to keep improving the novel. Each version has a different number of chapters and different passages are included and left out. As for her second novel, *Panda*, she revised this extensively for both the Chinese market and Western translations. Apparently, Mian Mian never considers her novels to be “finished,” making them as ever-changing as the city they depict.

The structure of *Candy* still betrays its origin as a collection of stories (*La La Lan*). The novel consists of somewhat disjointed chapters, shifting between passages written in a raw, direct language with little punctuation and poetically descriptive ones, often employing a narrative technique that Robert Alter (2005: x) has called ‘experiential realism’:

> The practice of conducting the narrative more and more through the moment-by-moment experience – sensory, visceral, and mental – of the main character or characters.

The novel is probably best summed up by Hong herself: “In the end, do we lose control in order to gain our freedom, or is our freedom itself just one way of being out of control?” (150). The confusion that the characters experience is reflected in a fragmented, staccato style: time and place suddenly change, making it difficult sometimes to know where or when a scene is taking place. In addition, the ‘I’ appears not always to be Hong, but sometimes one of her boyfriends or friends.

The story starts in Shanghai, when Hong’s best friend Lingzi commits suicide. The incident deeply influences Hong’s attitude towards the world:

> I quit trusting anything that anyone told me. Aside from the food that I put into my mouth, there was nothing I believed in. I had lost faith in everything. I was sixteen, but my life was over. Fucking over. (6)

She is brutally confronted with the fact that she doesn’t feel at home in the world, but also that it is possible to choose a way out of it. Where Lingzi literally steps out of this world, Hong decides to drop out of her elite high school and leave Shanghai. She goes to Shenzhen, a booming city in the southern SEZs, where in the beginning

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of the 1990s job opportunities were far better than in Shanghai. In the words of Andrea Lingenfelter (2003: vii-iii):

The relaxation of state control and the relative freedom soon created a frontier mentality, and many forms of vice and corruption came to flourish alongside more legitimate private enterprise.

Hong initially loves the freedom the city breathes; it’s the city of nightclubs, gambling, drugs and prostitution, representing a new world that people like Hong desperately waited for when Shanghai was still like a boring provincial town.

In Shenzhen, Hong meets Saining, a reserved, depressed musician addicted to heroin. Saining’s parents were known as ‘artistic political criminals’ and had, at the end of the 1960s, been sentenced to ‘Reform through Labor’ 劳改, in a labor prison camp that was organized like a factory. Saining was born in the camp and bullied all through his childhood. After his parents were rehabilitated, they immediately divorced when Saining was 12 years old. His mother went to Japan where she remarried, while his father went to England with Saining. When Hong meets Saining, he has been back from England for one year. As Hong remarks, “He wasn’t Chinese, and he wasn’t Western” (86).

Breaking with her staid upbringing, Hong leads a life full of drugs and alcohol, hanging out with Saining and a circle of friends, consisting of musicians, thieves and prostitutes. Living on the seamy side of urban life, she tries to find in Shenzhen what she couldn’t find in Shanghai. Their refusal to play a respectable role in society is partly conscious choice, partly inability:

For one thing, we each had our own worlds, our own mute worlds, and because of this, we respected each other’s silences. We both had asthma, both of us used to be picked on, neither of us had any grand ideals. We weren’t interested in other peoples’ lives, we were sensitive and self-doubting, we didn’t believe what we read in the newspapers, we were afraid of failure, and yet the thought of resisting some temptation made us anxious. We wanted to be onstage, to be artists. We kept spending other people’s money, dreading the day when all of this would change. We didn’t want to become little members of society, nor did we know how. (50)

Their dream is to be famous, but when they achieve fame (Saining in music, Hong as a writer) they are disappointed by its emptiness. Hong needs Saining to confirm his love for her continually in order to feel alive at all. She practically wallows in her dependence on him. However, their relationship is unstable and destructive. One day, Saining asks her what she wants for her birthday, and Hong answers “I want you to be my boyfriend; I want something called love” (29). Saining replies that “boyfriends are for little girls” and kicks her out of the house. Fortunately Hong knows how to put herself in perspective and is never free of self-irony:
I was so weak, so desperate for love, and deeply aware of my own pathos, I developed a knack for displaying my self-absorption and self-pity. That was my closed, intense inner world, and I thought that it was beautiful. (142)

When her father hears of Hong’s drug addiction, he comes to Shenzhen to bring her back to Shanghai and send her to a rehab center – which is actually a psychiatric institution – but without any success:

After being discharged from the clinic, I flew straight back to the South and right back to heroin. Heroin had become as natural to me as breathing. What else was there for me to do except to use smack? My first glimpse of my parents had frightened me. They were too normal. I couldn’t be around normal people. They would never be able to understand the emptiness of using heroin or the terror that comes from quitting it. The days without heroin were a blank expanse. If I didn’t have heroin, it didn’t seem as if I could go on living. Life had no content, but I didn’t really want to kill myself either. (98)

In 1994, Hong’s father sends her again to rehab in Shanghai, and this time she feels it’s the right thing:

I’m sure I would have died in the South. […] First I’d spent all my energy trying to get love and alcohol, and then I’d laid my body down on the altar of heroin, and I had always known that this meant I was lonely and crazy. (128-9)

In Shanghai, Hong tries to forget about Saining. She has several boyfriends and she is involved in a kind of love triangle with two of her male friends, Apple and Kiwi. At high school Hong was already in love with Apple, but Apple was in love with Kiwi with whom he had a short love affair. Years later Kiwi started a relationship with Hong.

Hong decides, encouraged by Saining who has now also come to Shanghai, to write down her Shenzhen experiences in a novel. Knowing that the author Mian Mian led a similar life in the same period in Shenzhen, the reader might think the novel Hong is talking about is in fact Candy itself, but in the last chapter, Mian Mian mystifyingly writes:

I am a ditch where water has collected after the rain, my name is Mian Mian, and this story is not the story of my life. My life story will have to wait until I can write nakedly. That’s my dream. […] The voice in my writing is like the

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159 This sentence seems a reference to the famous first line of the novella Fabrication 虚构 by Ma Yuan 马原: “I am that Han guy called Ma Yuan, I write novels,” which, according to Huot (2000: 10), “propelled Ma Yuan’s work into the category of experimental writing and opened up metafiction in China.”
reverberations of a bottle breaking at midnight. Listening over and over to the Radiohead CD I stole from a friend, on this uniquely pure and stainless morning, here at S [the title of the chapter]. I come to the end of this piece of candy. (270)

This passage shows once again how Mian Mian plays with reality and fiction, deliberately confusing her readers.

**Pubs and Parties**

Since *Candy* is mainly written through the eyes of Hong who explicitly describes the differences between the Shanghai she grew up in and the Shanghai she returns to after her years in Shenzhen, it gives an interesting ‘makeover portrait’ of Shanghai’s transformation. More developed than Shanghai when Hong grew up there, Shenzhen seems to function as the abstracted prefiguration of the contemporary Shanghai she will be returning to later. Remarkably, in contrast to Shanghai, Shenzhen is never mentioned by name, and the novel only refers to “a city in the South” or “the South.” It is only Mian Mian’s biographical information that suggests she is referring to Shenzhen.

When Hong has just come back from Shenzhen, she doesn’t feel at home in the completely changed city. It is her first love Apple who introduces Hong to the new Shanghai:

He’d taken me to Huaihai Road, where we wandered through new department stores, and he’d told me all about the latest trends. […] Shanghai had been completely transformed. It was no longer anything like the old Shanghai. It was becoming more beautiful and more hollow all the time. Fortunately I had Apple and Bug; otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to form a relationship with this new city. (157-8)

In this way, it is through Hong’s love for Apple that she also “started to like Shanghai, to like all those new names, with foreign words mixed in” (158), such as the English word *party* that has now replaced the Chinese word (晚会), but is still affixed to traditional Chinese themes:

Everyone uses the English word these days. Moon-cake *party*, five-chrysanthemum *party*, golden stem and jade leaf *party*. Shanghai is the mother of all ‘parties.’ (167)

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160 The original edition has four more chapters and thus ends with the chapter W.
161 "Golden stem and jade leaf” is a Chinese idiom for a person of noble birth, but could also be a reference to the title of a popular movie with the famous actor Leslie Cheung and directed by Peter Chan Ho Sun (English title: *He’s a Woman, She’s a Man*, 1994).
All the new, and specifically Western, features excite her:

Saining often came to Shanghai to see me, and we usually got together with Bug. He joined us as we sought out the new life of Shanghai, and all of this helped me feel a bit better. Lots of video rental stands had sprung up in Shanghai; they rented Hollywood movies and movies from Europe too. [...] I filled the evening hours of my drug-free life with movies from the West. [...] Bug took us to a little shop in Five Corners, out by our university, to buy records, and we saw disks that had had notches cut into them with electric saws. [...] Word was that these were surplus products sent by Western record companies as gifts to the children of our socialist country, but that customs had cut them, and then they’d been smuggled in. These notched and holey recordings were like a miracle, and nobody was really sure what the story behind them was. They were like a huge gift from heaven, and the whole thing was a deep mystery. [...] Sick and tired of waiting, we were finally entering a new world. (151-2)

In spite of her initial enthusiasm, though, what she feels to be the predictability, fakeness and emptiness of this new life soon start to bore her. Besides, as a native Shanghainese, she doesn’t really relate to the ‘new Shanghainese’ coming from other parts of China and abroad, who don’t even speak the local dialect:

Some of the foreigners hosted lots of parties, but the air at those parties was both sweet and false, as if everybody had become white-collar workers overnight, and there were models, singers, and local artists, the genuine and the fake, and I didn’t really know what I was doing there, in the midst of all of that. Everyone was speaking Mandarin or English; nobody spoke much Shanghainese. [...] (158)

So many foreign companies have cropped up, it seems as though everyone is living better. I don’t know what kind of fun an out-of-work person like me is going to have, though. When I go to parties on the weekend, I often run into the same bunch of people, even though the locations are different. (167)

Hong and her friends usually stay at home during the day – mostly sleeping, but also drinking, listening to music, or watching TV – and go out during the night. Just like she did in Shenzhen, Hong plunges herself into Shanghai’s nightlife. Its enticements and liberating contrast with an ordered, collective, and common ‘daytime existence’ attract her at first. However, the ambivalence in her reaction to the new Shanghai in general can also be observed with respect to Shanghai’s nightlife. What Hong soon finds there is the very boredom from which she is trying to escape:

Every weekend is the same to me. The locations change, but it’s still the same bullshit. Shanghai nightlife is hopeless. But we go out on weekends anyway.
Weekend nights are like a stage, and we’re the performers, only we’ve started to forget our lines. We wander around South Maoming Road, thinking we’ll go barhopping. Groove is gone, permanently shut down, and in its place there’s a teahouse. YY’s empty, and with no one there, we don’t want to be there either. We’re hopelessly boring, ourselves. […] But for now, all we have is the phoniness of South Maoming Road. (240)  

So, despite its “phoniness,” nightlife is evidently still for Hong the only possible form of life, at least “for now.” Hong’s comparison of clubbing with being onstage chimes in with Farrer’s (2002: 84) remark that: “Urban life is much like theater, a constant performance in front of a group of judgmental strangers.” While Hong anxiously tries to fill the emptiness she feels inside by visiting the Shanghai clubs, these places appear to have nothing else to offer than this same emptiness. Irmy Schweiger points out another paradoxical tendency in the novel: whereas the characters hope that being in crowds of Shanghai nightlife will help against their loneliness, the opposite is true. Schweiger (2005: 383)  

Escaping from loneliness into mass events, the individual is confronted even more strongly with her/his isolation. The act of immersion into the crowd itself is what, to a certain extent, throws her/him back on her/himself. Not to be alone in this, is only partly comforting.  

The Paradox of Metropolitan Life  

Ever since the acceleration of the industrialization process in Europe, and its concomitant urbanization, the psychological effects of living in a densely populated environment have been an important theme in urban sociology. As Tang ([Xiaobing] 2000: 276) argues:  

I wish to emphasize that contemporary Chinese urban culture can and should be subjected to the same classic scrutiny and creative analyses that we find in the writings of Georg Simmel, Emile Durkheim, Walter Benjamin, Kevin Lynch, and Raymond Williams. Their critical insights into the modern city and its culture will prove to be an indispensable basis for any credible urban studies in contemporary China.  

The pioneer in this field, the sociologist Georg Simmel (2000: 181), claims in his 1903 essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” that although city residents enjoy the greatest freedom, this is overshadowed by the loneliness they feel in the midst of crowds:  

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162 Maoming Road is a famous mini nightlife district in West Shanghai with many pubs and karaoke bars. In August 2000, several clubs were closed because of a national police action against vice and drugs.
Escape

For the reciprocal reserve and indifference and the intellectual life conditions of large circles are never felt more strongly by the individual in their impact upon his independence than in the thickest crowd of the big city. This is because the bodily proximity and narrowness of space makes the mental distance only the more visible. It is obviously only the obverse of this freedom if, under certain circumstances, one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd.

Being on the streets means being surrounded by thousands of strangers, generating paradoxical feelings of safety and a sense of belonging on the one hand and a fear of anonymity and insignificance on the other. The urban experience of the characters in Candy clearly tends to be dominated by the latter: in her anxiety of being absorbed by the crowd, the dream of Hong is even to be “put on playbills all over Shanghai” (186).

To attract attention, Hong dresses and acts in an eccentric way and performs and sings in pubs. In this way she rebuilds a public place into a stage for herself. When she is at home, Hong complains about boredom and depression, while coming alive when she is onstage:

Saining liked to watch me onstage with my long hair and short skirt, and I liked to stare at my legs swaying back and forth to the music of my own thin voice as I sang, my hair whipping around and to cover my breasts or hide my cheeks, something I thought accentuated the three-dimensionality of my features. And I foolishly thought that this helped me create an aura of mystery. In those days, performing was almost a pretext for me to have a good time, a pleasure that was enhanced by the fact that I had an audience. (89)

Performing makes her feel “the three-dimensionality” of her features – implying that her normal self is flat and two-dimensional – and gives her a fulfilling sense of authenticity. She consciously creates a mysterious identity:

I always put a lot of care and effort into picking out whatever clothing, jewelry, and makeup colors I am going to wear, and I need to walk around in a cloud of perfume and to have many secrets. (167)

Another way in which Hong seeks attention is by shocking or stirring people’s emotions. One day, Hong intentionally attempts suicide just before her friend Sanmao will come home, so he can rescue her:

I chose a blustery and moonless night to slash my wrists […] And when the knife in my hand pressed against my vein and finally cut through, I felt as though this was real, and I shook and felt my body approaching a state of bliss, and I was crying. (45)
For Hong this is the furthest she can go in feeling real. When Saining arrives in the hospital he angrily remarks that suicide “isn’t something you perform for an audience.”

Kiwi also needs to be seen to be able to feel: even in the private space of a home he can only reach orgasm when he and Hong have sex in front of a mirror. He needs to see Hong watching him in the mirror:

We always made love the same way. He used his mouth to give me pleasure, and I had to kneel beside him, my back to the mirror, tights straight, twisting at the waist, with my arms hanging loosely at my sides. And he looked at the reflection of my back in the mirror and masturbated. I admired the way he masturbated; I thought that here was a man who really enjoyed playing with himself, and I watched him watching me in the mirror, with his left hand circling up, and his penis like the slash of the moon, because he needed to have me watching him in order for him to come. (154)

Later Kiwi goes further by asking his friend Apple to film them having sex, because he “wanted the video to be an investigation of the zeitgeist, presented in a form that would genuinely move people” (156-7). So, Hong and Kiwi want to perform the most “private act,” such as suicide or sex, in front of an audience. This is arguably the extreme manifestation of the metropolitan ‘mass loneliness.’

Writing on Weihui and Mian Mian, Schweiger (2005: 383) remarks:

Consumption, for them, is no secret seduction to which they unconsciously succumb. On the contrary, they practice this consumption excessively, almost turning it into a ritual act. Nevertheless, the attempt to escape from the world and themselves by consumption (dance, music, body) is thwarted by the other’s gaze, casting the individual back into the faceless crowd.

For the works of Weihui, I agree with Schweiger’s reading, as I will elaborate in the next chapter. As for Mian Mian’s Candy, however, Schweiger’s reading is open to debate. Whereas she maintains that the gaze of the other condemns the characters to being part of a faceless crowd, in my opinion, Hong uses this very gaze for self-validation. Hong’s way of consumption (in Schweiger’s sense of ‘dance, music, bodies’) compels the crowd’s attention, offering her an escape from her false, empty self, and an opportunity to create a ‘true’ self. There is a difference between wanting to escape from the world and the self in the euphoria of consumption on the one hand, and embracing, by self-enactment, this same world to confirm one’s existence on the other.
Intoxication

Hong’s response to the emptiness she perceives in the new Shanghai is twofold: on the one hand she lifts herself out of mass anonymity by inventing a public persona, on the other hand she seeks a drug-induced, interiorized emptiness, as if to render the real thing outside more palatable. Both Hong and Saining use drugs to escape from this world into another one:

Saining said that heroin made him euphoric, letting him forget what the world was like, bringing him peace and serenity, giving him a world of his own. [...] When you’re feeling numb, the best thing to do is to jump into a whirlpool. As for me, I’ve stumbled into the heroin whirlpool, that’s all. Heroin is me, my way of coping; it’s my world, and who I am doesn’t matter anymore. (72-3)

Heroin anaesthetizes them against the pain of living, and it blocks what Simmel (2000: 175) calls, “the intensification of nervous stimulation, which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli.” Hong begins as an alcoholic, and later starts using XTC and heroin:

The world was vanishing right in front of me. All the better. The best thing about heroin was that it let me drift without end into a dizzying void. I was empty from the inside out. Time sped up, and life and death seemed to dangle high above my head, like two palaces, and there I was, trapped and vacillating in the space between. (97)

The ultimate meaning and certainty seem, paradoxically, to lie in the very same emptiness Hong so strenuously tries to escape: “This emptiness gave me a sense of balance. The only meaning in my life was that my life was meaningless” (97). Saining and Hong fruitlessly attempt to break free from their vacillating existence, but they are unable to be part of the ordinary world and they cannot fool themselves into pretending that life is meaningful.

After Hong finds out that the thrill of intense experience, whether in clubbing or in drugs, isn’t sustainable in the long run, she takes refuge in creating her own world: she is going to write. She wants to transform the inner emptiness into candy, as she formulates it. Here we encounter again her longing to be seen:

Writing came to me on the doctors’ orders. Really I was writing simply to gain a clearer understanding of myself. [...] As I wrote, I became more ambitious, and I wanted lots of people to read what I wrote – I wanted the whole world to see what I’d written. (184)

By writing Hong creates a stable ego in a world of change and flux, and an alternative, intimate space of imagination, in which the uprooted individual can feel
at home. It is her ultimate escape attempt, her last attempt at giving a personal meaning to her life:

I’ve been defeated, so writing is all I have. (270)

**Familiarity and Alienation in Panda**

Panda depicts the conversations and actions of a group of friends, during one weekend. As there is neither a storyline, a plot, nor a real protagonist – except, perhaps, for the city itself – the novel is better described as a collection of fragmented impressions of Shanghai’s nightlife. The narrator merely documents in an almost meditative style seemingly coincidental and insignificant conversations overheard in the streets, in taxi’s, in nightclubs, or at parties. The private realm doesn’t exist in this reflection of urban life, only the public. The locations where the scenes take place are described in great detail; each street is named, as is each building, club, gallery, etc. There are two main themes in the novel: the vicissitudes of love and relationships, and the emptiness of modern city life.

The blurring of the line between reality and fiction, already present in *Candy*, is even more pronounced in *Panda*: the text alternates with song lyrics, collages of pictures of the places and people featured in the novel, and there are footnotes with detailed information on the location and addresses of the streets, galleries, clubs, pubs mentioned, and people’s email addresses.¹⁶³ Undermining the seeming authenticity of all this, the first page blithely tells us the characters in the novel are all fictional. So the novel calls itself into question, playing with the genres of novel, drama, diary, travel guide, academic texts, and the Yellow Pages.¹⁶⁴ In the 2008 edition of *Panda*, Mian Mian goes even further in mixing fiction and reality when the characters Hong and Saining feature again, and Saining complains about how Hong once wrote a novel about him called *Candy*, in which “she even used his real name.”

These postmodern literary techniques evoke in the reader the same sense of alienation and disorientation that the characters inside the novel experience. It reminds one of writers such as Kathy Acker, whose “postmodern novels are good examples of an ironic use of interdiscursivity [a narrative voice that speaks a mix of different discourses],” in the words of Bal (1997: 65):

> They consist of a variety of textual modes (dramatic dialogue, prose narrative as well as poetry), narrative modes (character-bound narrator as well as external narrator), genres (autobiography, art and political criticism, travel literature, pornographic literature), media (words, images), and typographic styles.

¹⁶³ In the reprint of 2009, the pictures and footnotes are not included, while the reprint of 2010 only includes the pictures.
¹⁶⁴ Mian Mian uses the same literary techniques in her novel *Oath* (2009).
**Escape**

Where Mian Mian creates a consciously subjective public platform for herself in *Candy*, in *Panda* she creates a fictional Shanghai as a quasi-objective platform for a variety of characters, in which she herself recedes into the background. The narrator jumps from hyper-realistic specificity to poetic and deliberate vagueness, such as in the abstractness of the characters’ names. Although some of the characters have realistic (mostly Western) names, others are only referred to by numbers (1, 2), capital letters (A, G, K, etc), woman / man, man1 / man2 / man3, girl / boy, little / older sister, and names like ABC.

In this way, people are no longer desiring subjects, such as the characters in *Candy*, but they become almost interchangeable, merely serving as representing certain types, such as the name ABC, which Chinese readers will immediately identify as a stereotypical ‘American born Chinese.’ Moreover, the flat, nameless characters reflect the anonymous crowd of the metropolis. All characters are equally important; each person’s background is unimportant. It is their words that are depicted, but their motives remain unexplained.

In a similar way, the narrative structure reflects the speed and chaos of modernizing Shanghai:

Somewhere else, on the Yangpu viaduct, empty at night.
One jeep drives behind the other.
In front drives older sister from the earlier video.
In the back drives the mysterious man from the earlier video.
Older sister is constantly looking in the rearview mirror to the car behind her.

(23)

The characters’ utterances in direct speech in *Panda* are written in different registers, varying from short sentences in colloquial language, to formal monologues of several pages long, occasionally like prose poetry:

Spirits are passing through Shanghai this night, pallid, empty, unchangeable.
Mixed with the sounds of water sloshing in bamboo baskets and twigs snapping
is another sound – that of charmingly mischievous footfalls. (64)

The structures of the chapters are like drama texts, bringing to mind Baudrillard’s (2001: 159) statement that “reality is nothing but a staged world.” Several passages open with a description of the setting, atmosphere, weather, sounds, background music, etc, and continuing with dialogue:
A balcony of an apartment in Northern Bund Park, a TV stands on a glass table. ABC stands besides the TV, behind her rise the skyscrapers of Pudong, the Bund with a gigantic cruise ship moored to the quay. The rain gives Pudong an even more futuristic appearance. The quays on the Northern Bund. The little lights on the shores of the Huangpu. ABC stands besides the small TV. ABC: How can you save yourself and get completely disconnected from life? TV! By watching TV. The TV is in front of you. This TV that looks like a candle is different from ordinary TVs. Lino: How come it looks like a candle? ABC sighs: … This is an unfinished product; they are still in the process of solving its exterior problems. (25-7)

The TV mentioned in this passage appears to be an ironic image for modern technology as only providing a way of escape from reality, but also a way to manipulate reality:

It receives the same channels as an ordinary TV. But you can change completely what is being said in the show, and what there is to be seen. Even the facial expressions. You just have to put some time into it. You can even splice the funeral you just filmed into this TV. (29)

In this way, the portrayal of Shanghai’s modernization craze is never free from a sense of irony, as in the following passage referring to a slogan by the city government, i.e. “Shanghai is the future”:

Everyone says that Shanghai is the future. What will the future be like? The answer to that question is like this big X at the floor indicator of the elevator, the X that quickly flashes from 1 to 54. (160)

The characters in this passage are standing in the elevator of the Jin Mao Tower at Pudong. It is one of the tallest buildings in China, and with its East-meets-West design signifies Shanghai’s emergence as a modern global city. For Panda’s characters the skyscrapers of Pudong represent the prosperity of modernizing Shanghai and at the same time the emptiness behind that prosperity. Or in the words of Mian Mian:

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165 The page left from the dialogue shows a picture of Pudong shrouded in mist.
Shanghai today is only about business, business, business, it’s without any culture […] Shanghai is fake, Shanghai is empty, Shanghai is Pudong, you know. (Interview with Mian Mian in October 2005, Amsterdam)

In conclusion, the psychological trajectory the protagonist of Candy follows is fatally circular and might be described thus: wanting to escape her inner emptiness, Hong escapes into public consumption inside Shanghai’s nightlife, only to be disappointed and a renewed sense of emptiness sets in. It is as if the void in Hong’s being (her depression) mirrors a void in the heart of modernizing Shanghai. In the end, Hong breaks out of this vicious cycle by putting it into a book. In Panda, the struggle seems to be over: the protagonist has almost disappeared, the ‘I’ has become an intrinsic part of its urban environment, and escapes into the crowd, whose facelessness Hong so desperately had tried to avoid by self-enactment.

JIN HAISHU: ESCAPE INTO THE GARBAGE DUMP

No other city in China could be more concerned about and more sensitive to the concept of private space than Shanghai is. Shanghai people regard their home as an ego-world that is always on the alert.

Zhang Hong 张闯 (2006: 5)

Whereas Mian Mian’s stories take place in the city center or the newly built area of Pudong, in Jin Haishu’s stories the characters live in poorly maintained flats in old suburbs. They are unsociable, unemployed, and often divorced or single. Their attitude towards other people is generally reserved, and sometimes aggressive.

Even though their living environment of densely built blocks of flats forces the characters to be confronted with many neighbors, they remain aloof from them. Their behavior chimes in with what Simmel observes in the modern metropolis. Since “the continuous external contacts with innumerable people,” Simmel (2000: 179) asserts, make it impossible to have “inner reactions” to all of them, metropolitan people need a reserved attitude in order to survive:

As a result of this reserve we frequently do not even know by sight those who have been our neighbors for years. And it is this reserve, which in the eyes of the small-town people makes us appear to be cold and heartless. Indeed, if I do not deceive myself, the inner aspect of this outer reserve is not only indifference but, more often than we are aware, it is a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion, which will break into hatred and fight at the moment of a closer contact, however caused.

In her reading of post-Mao urban novels, Visser (2002: 71) identifies several ways in which China’s shifting urban configurations shape new conceptions of privacy:
The radical transformation of China’s cities in the past two decades has profoundly impacted Chinese conceptions of privacy owing to the flux of metropolitan crowds, patterns of urban destruction and renewal, altered economic configurations, and the introduction of new technologies of transportation, communication, and socialization. [...] First, protagonists often maintain a reserved public persona to mask a sense of repulsion and alienation from the city and its masses; in turn, their private lives are dominated by obsessive desire. Second, fictional characters regularly construct their own private utopias in order to offset the exterior chaos of the metropolis and regain an integrated, autonomous sense of self. Third, this self-imposed privacy often results in psychopathic symptoms of paranoia and melancholy.\footnote{The works discussed by Visser are: Liu Heng’s 	extit{Black Snow} 黑的雪, Chen Ran’s 	extit{Private Life} 私人生活, Qiu Huadong’s 	extit{Fly Eyes} 飞眼, Zhu Wen’s 	extit{What’s trash, what’s love} 什么是垃圾，什么是爱, Sun Ganlu’s 	extit{Breathing} 呼吸 and Ge Fei’s 	extit{Banner of Desire} 欲望的棋子.}

Although not discussed by Visser, Jin Haishu’s short stories show the exact same tendency. Take for example Jin’s short story “Lonely Woman” 孤单的女人 (2006), which tells the story of a divorced woman, Wang Ni, who lives alone and has a “nonsense job.”\footnote{Since Jin Haishu’s stories “Lonely Women” and “Bathing” were published online (see Works Cited), there are no references to page numbers.} She dates a man who has had a crush on her for a long time, but she mostly makes fun of him in a humiliating tone. She fails to feel affection for other people, and money seems to be the only thing that provides some sense of satisfaction: “After Wang Ni had the money in her pocket she felt a bit more at ease,” and when she buys sunglasses of ¥ 800 from her ex-husband’s monthly alimony: “It felt right to buy useless stuff of the money of the man of her past; besides, she had already wanted to buy these sunglasses a long time ago.” However, to collect the money she needs to endure the annoyance of being in the crowd:

Wang Ni had almost lost her temper this afternoon, when she went to collect her money from the bank. A sickening baldhead was standing in front of her; the line had been extremely long, people were everywhere, like shit in a pile of shit. When it was the baldhead’s turn, he trapped the post office clerk with numerous questions: post stamps should be pasted like this, right? The address should be written like this, right? He made a complete fool of himself. While asking these questions he glanced sideways at Wang Ni. She anxiously wished a small hand would stretch out of her eyes and grab him where the points of his collar met. Fucking asshole, so old and can’t even think for himself.

Wang Ni’s aggression towards her surroundings soon reflects on herself: “Life is really frustrating, so annoying. She didn’t even understand herself why it felt so annoying.” After a dinner date with the man who likes her – “There isn’t much to tell about the dinner, just the same old story” – she goes back to her apartment.
However, when Wang Ni enters her home she feels alienated from her own space, it even feels like entering “the apartment of a stranger”:

Wang Ni felt a huge distance between her and all the objects, which she had never experienced before. God knows what was going on. To be more concrete, it was like the apartment had become more spacious, all emptiness, making her feel a hollow pressure. She turned on the TV. A couple of boring celebrities were having an informal discussion, telling about their multicolored, busy lives; like a couple of stupid cunts gathered together to have a meeting. She turned off the TV, but the feeling of emptiness still wasn’t gone. Wang Ni thought about the fact that she was a weak person at heart. She turned on the airconditioning and sat on the bed. The sheet had semen stains. Standing up again, she pulled off the sheet, angrily rolled it into a ball and threw it into the corner of the room. Lying on the bare Simmons mattress, she started to caress herself; a desperate thirty-something single, wet like the Huangguoshu Falls. Wang Ni’s thoughts focused on sex, trying to resume a feeling of intimacy with daily life.

Of course, this was useless. She started crying and her tears softly rolled over the corner of her eyes and her ears, dropping on her pillow and making it all wet.

Wang’s escape into her room doesn’t work: she feels just as estranged as in the outside world. So, her failure to feel at home and find a role in public life seems to be reflected in the malfunctioning of her private sphere. Wang even feels distanced from her own furniture, which is a recurrent theme in Jin Haishu’s work.

When the most fundamental objects forming private space, i.e. furniture, lose their meaning and function, private space collapses. The character’s troubled relationship to their furniture could thus be a metaphor for their difficulties in creating a comforting private space. What ought to be comforting and familiar shows a strange and disconcerting face – the unmistakable sign of the uncanny.168

In an attempt to break through this feeling of the uncanny, Wang Ni brings the outside world into her private realm by turning on the TV. However, the personal stories of the public figures don’t make her feel less empty inside. On the contrary, they confirm and reflect her feelings of emptiness. Her last attempt is to masturbate, hoping that the sensuous awareness of her body can fill the emptiness. Yet again, without her identity being acknowledged in public space, she isn’t capable of ‘being someone’ in the private realm. Nevertheless, she is now able to feel something: she starts crying.

Lying on her bed, Wang Ni suddenly remembers a “light green pill” she once took at a party. It had made her feel a tremendous joy and the people at the party had “changed into weak children, full of good intentions”:

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168 Cf. Vidler (1992: 4): “The uncanny was, in this first incarnation, a sensation best experienced in the privacy of the interior.”
Later she had been lying over the water closet, unclear if she was asleep. A guy had come in to pee, and after flushing the toilet he wanted to help her stand up. But neither had any strength, so they ended up lying on the floor together, talking in sweet words and honeyed phrases. At the time there were about seven or eight people present, two girls and the rest were boys, but the strange thing is that nothing related to sex happened. We treasured and looked after each other. In this way heaven dropped down light and easy into the three-room apartment. The feeling at that time was really amazing.

Wang Ni’s yearning to relive this experience – “if a person’s life could be like this forever, […] she wouldn’t need anything more whatsoever” – reveals that her aggressive attitude is merely a defensive measure to ward off ultimate despair. She longs for a peaceful, physical oneness, without any sexual connotation; a return to a fetus-like existence. However, she needs a medium to escape, and “What was missing in her hand right now was just one of those pills.”

**Becoming Garbage**

“Moving House” 搬家 (1999) tells the story of Li Hua, who after having moved house many times in a short period of time, wants to move again. The story is narrated in the first person, by a friend of Li Hua who reluctantly helps him with the removal. The narrator cannot think of a sensible reason why Li Hua should move again and it even makes him wonder if Li Hua has gone crazy. He gets increasingly agitated and tries to persuade Li Hua to change his mind. Li Hua, however, doesn’t respond to his friend and mainly keeps silent.

This inability to communicate is a recurrent trait of Jin Haishu’s characters. Remarkably, modern technology invented to facilitate communication only aggravates this inability. For example, in several stories, a telephone keeps ringing, but when it’s picked up no one answers. In “Moving House” the narrator complains that Li Hua used to call him a lot and then kept on talking “without really saying anything.” The only “solution” the narrator could think of, was to “hang the telephone and receiver at some distance on the wall”: “this solved a lot of my problems; every time I had done this I would have some peace” (97). Some friends of the narrator, however, were even capable of making the telephone ring when the receiver had not been replaced in its cradle. To make things worse, they would continue calling until the narrator was forced to pick up the phone “and resume his ordinary life.”

This ambivalent relationship with modern technology is also revealed in another passage in “Moving House,” when the narrator enters Li Hua’s apartment on the day of the removal:

When I opened the door Li Hua was sitting among his things, like garbage between garbage. Strewn across the floor were his unwashed clothes, parts of a
dismantled computer and a jumble of pulled-out wires. He was sitting blankly on the monitor. When I came in he was just gazing at a mouse, moving along the baseboard. The sound of my footsteps made the mouse freeze in fright, turn its head and look up at me with rolling eyes. (99)

The component parts of the dismantled computer are scattered across the floor, having lost all function. It is the first sign that Li Hua is breaking with all aspects of modern metropolitan life. The monitor here functions as a traditional utensil, i.e. a chair. It gives the narrator, standing in the “jumble of pulled-out wires,” a “very uncomfortable feeling” and he therefore “urges Li Hua to sit on a normal chair.” However, Li Hua refuses to answer him yet again.

Whereas Li Hua ignores the narrator, the mouse does react to him. The first association the reader might have is with a computer mouse, but it concerns a real, living mouse. In this way, Jin Haishu plays with the readers’ expectations. When Li Hua and the narrator both look at the mouse, the mouse becomes momentary a point of contact between Li Hua and the narrator, as if nature were better able at connecting people than technology. While Li Hua just sits there “smoking with a depressed, blank expression” and refusing to talk, the narrator gives up his desperate attempts to persuade him and is overwhelmed by a feeling of sadness: “I hung my head, I wanted to look at the mouse, but the mouse was already nowhere to be seen” (99).

Li Hua not only refuses to tell why he wants to move, but also to which address until the moment they sit in the removal truck and Li Hua gives directions to the driver. After a two-hour drive out of the city center, they finally arrive at a garbage dump where Li Hua tells the driver to stop. He walks to a broken, old, dusty army truck without wheels and tells the removal men that this is the place where he will live. Although Li Hua’s new dwelling is in as much as we take it to be his home, it is still part of a public site and (originally) a state-owned vehicle meant to be in motion, not for sedentary shelter.

By choosing to live in a waste product, in a garbage dump, Li Hua breaks all conventional rules of what a living space should be like, shocking the narrator who desperately tries to persuade Li Hua with rational arguments:

What is it that you want? Money? A woman? If it’s about a woman, I can take care of that […] You are a human being, a human being, you know. Do you know what that is? You’re not garbage; it’s ridiculous that you should throw yourself on a garbage dump. (101)

Li Hua, however, is convinced of his choice and explains he has finally found his home: “I just want to live here. There is nothing wrong with living here. […] It has cost me a lot of trouble to find this place, I don’t want to keep on moving from one place to another.” Li Hua’s stoic determination disposes of all rational arguments, and stirs, in rapid succession, a host of emotions in the narrator: irritation, anxiety,
incomprehension, confusion, sadness, doubt, shock, apathy, anger, and finally panic. In this way, Li Hua forces the narrator to act out of his ‘metropolitan character,’ as defined by Simmel (2000: 176):

Thus the metropolitan type of man – which, of course, exists in a thousand individual variants –, develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment, which would uproot him. He reacts with his head instead of his heart.

The narrator is puzzled by his own violent emotional response – from the heart – to Li Hua’s eccentric behavior. Apparently, Li Hua’s sudden refusal to conform to metropolitan life makes the narrator doubt his own “normal” life, to which he so anxiously clings, even though he does not see the instability of life in the chaotic, ever-changing metropolis as ideal. Accordingly, the story ends with the narrator who in a sheer panic runs after the removal truck as it drives away, screaming and waving his arms to make it stop. He wants to go home, to his “normal life,” “even though it was a bigger dump than this one, more chaotic and more dirty” (102). However, the driver of the removal truck doesn’t see him, and while he is running the ground is literary disappearing under his feet: he rises up into the air, but he feels that “the danger of falling down” is “even less scarily than the idea of being left at the garbage dump” (102).

Ironically, Li Hua breaks with modern metropolitan life by moving into the iconic product of that same life. His escape is not by leaving the city, but by becoming one with the residual matter of urban consumption: trash. His refusal to adapt to the changing environment is only possible by “burying” himself in a garbage dump. By living in a truck – meant for transporting objects – one could argue that Li Hua reduces himself to an object, confirmed by his literal transformation into a piece of garbage, at the end of the story. When Li Hua stands against the truck his body slowly starts to shrivel down “to a rag of dried skin, like a pair of jeans that hasn’t been washed for years”:

Li Hua stood slumped against the side of the truck, like the corpse of a murder committed a long time ago, I was neither defendant nor witness, but I was standing before a living, bone-dry body and didn’t know what else could happen. (101)

On impulse, the narrator grabs the skin, folds it and lays it on the chair in front of the truck. The brand name of the truck is Liberation 解放, Chinese Communist terminology for the founding of the People’s Republic, which may imply an ironic metaphor; communism lying on a dump, “as garbage between garbage” (99), to borrow Jin’s words. Or has Li Hua’s transformation into garbage liberated him from his fruitless search for meaning and belonging in the metropolis? If so, he has indeed escaped successfully.

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MIAN MIAN AND JIN HAISHU: ESCAPE INTO THE BATHROOM

Within the home, the most private space of all is the bathroom. During the 1990s the private bathroom became so popular in China, that countless magazines on interior design had special issues devoted to different styles of luxurious bathrooms. A private bathroom, as a relatively new phenomenon, is thus a potent symbol of Shanghai’s new culture of consumerism and individuality.

Unsurprisingly, the bathroom is a recurrent setting in many contemporary Shanghai novels. It is the place where the characters can be completely alone and detach themselves from the outside world, where they can “hide away,” “whenever trouble looms,” as the narrator in Weihui’s Shanghai Babe puts it.

Bathing is not only associated with wealth and individuality, but also with the body. According to Ge Hongbing (2011: 136), consumerism and the body are two of the most prominent themes in contemporary Chinese culture. Ge sees a clear relationship between the two:

The body is at the core of consumerism: many products are aimed at it, such as clothes, make-up, and food, and also cosmetic surgery. Even more: the body itself has turned into a commodity, becoming distanced from its natural essence, or even opposite to it.

As Ge states in the same article, in the Mao era a preoccupation with the body was still considered “politically offensive” and “bourgeois.” Even though these moral objections have clearly changed, bathing is still associated with narcissism in the works of many Chinese writers. It seems the characters are still not fully comfortable with their newly acquired luxury aimed exclusively at the individual. However, their feelings are ambivalent. The characters are aware of their potential narcissism, but don’t necessarily consider this as something negative, as illustrated by the following paragraphs from works by Shanghai writers discussed in this study:

From Mian Mian’s Candy:

The only place he [Apple] ever cried was in his own bathtub; it had been this way for many years. The tears he cried in the bath weren’t in his tear ducts but in his skin, in every pore of his fingertips, knees, and heels, and between his legs. When he was in the bath, all of his pores opened up, and his tears seeped out. At first he cried out of narcissism or because he felt moved by himself, but later on he might cry for no reason. Sometimes, merely getting into the bathtub would make him start to cry. (170)

From Mian Mian’s Notorious:

In my home, the most interesting conversations take place in the bathroom. I often say that I should place a recorder in my bathroom and record all conversations. (20)
From Weihui’s *Shanghai Babe*:

I breathed a sigh of relief, lowered myself into the hot water and relaxed. Whenever trouble looms, I hide away in a hot bath. (72)

I lay depressed in the bath, surrounded by rose bubbles, a bottle of red wine within reach of my right hand. This was my most vulnerable but also my most narcissistic moment. (89)

From Weihui’s *Marrying Buddha* (2005: 210; translation by Larissa Heinrich):

Lying in the hot water, I scrubbed myself with a round pink sponge. The CD player was playing track eight. ‘Lonely,’ and Bebel was singing again and again: ‘Lonely, lonely, lonely.’ Every pore of my skin sang ‘lonely, lonely, lonely’ along with her. A fish struggles in a net, a rose struggles against being plucked, a woman wet in ecstasy approaches oblivion. But there are always one or two things which stay absolutely still. In the silence drops of vapour condensed into little pearls of water and dripped down from the ceiling making faint *dha* sounds.

From Ge Hongbing’s *Sandbed*:

I’m a cowardly scoundrel who feels safe in a bathtub. (202) When I slowly lowered my body into the hot water, the alcohol vaporized in my body and my head seemed to split open; a stream of sunlight poured in, bringing back childhood memories. (73)

From Yu Shi’s *Times of Narcissism* (2002a: 231):

“Did you know that when I lived alone, I loved most to come home and take a shower? Some people say it’s narcissism, but that isn’t right,” she suddenly said to him. “Then what is it?” [...] “Since I was living alone again at twenty-six, I often felt lonely. Sometimes, when the bathroom was full of steam, I even felt my body was talking; it was talking with my heart. This is definitely not narcissism, but loneliness. Only my body emitted a sound, saying: Still young.”

Speaking of their bodies in the third person, as distinct from another less physical part of the self, makes these characters feel less lonely. The protagonist in *Shanghai Babe* has just found out her German boyfriend is married when she lies depressed in her bathtub, the protagonist in *Times of Narcissism* explicitly and repeatedly speaks of her feelings of loneliness, and the character Apple in *Candy* has been an outsider all his life. In an ever-changing environment, the body seems to be the only constant, the last certainty to fall back on. It is the only ‘thing’ to believe in – “More than anything else, I believe in my body and my body conceals limitless truths” (162) – in a false and confusing world, as Hong regularly notes:

When I lay my body down, I can hear the sound of my blood flowing. It’s a feeling that’s both inspiring and oppressive. So many tedious efforts, my body
is cold and frail. In my own bathtub, it’s me and my body together under the moonlight. And when we’re alone together like this, it’s as if we’ve lost the entire world, but at least we’ll always have each other. To hell with language! To hell with orgasms! To hell with whores! To hell with love! My body and I just want to throw up! (213)

The paragraph, and in particular the sentence “it’s me and my body together under the moonlight,” seems to be a reference to a famous poem by Tang-dynasty poet Li Bai 李白 (701-762), in which he expresses how, when he is lonely, he drinks wine together with his shadow and the moon. The first four lines of this poem, in Arthur Waley’ translation, are: “A cup of wine, under the flowering trees / I drink alone, for no friend is near / Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon / For he, with my shadow, will make three men.” Remarkably, both characters feel lonely and abandoned by society, and whereas the lyric subject of Li Bai’s poem finds a friend in his shadow, Hong does so in her body. Furthermore, both immerse themselves into the intoxication of alcohol. According to legend, the poet Li Bai drowned when he drunkenly tried to embrace the reflection of the moon in the Yangzi River.

In Mian Mian’s Candy, the character Apple drowns as well, albeit in his tiny bathtub. In addition, two characters in the novel attempt suicide (Hong and Little Shanghai) and one commits suicide (Lingzi) in the bathroom, making the bathroom into a place of a ‘final retreat’ from the world.

**Forty Years of Bathing Stories**

In Jin Haishu’s stories, the bathroom is also a recurrent place of refuge. Take, for example, “Bathing” 洗澡 (2006) which tells the story of Ou Ya who at the age of nineteen, when he was having “some problems in his personal life,” became obsessed with taking baths:

He hadn’t passed the entrance exams for university, so of course he didn’t have work either, and what made things even worse was that he had already left his parents’ house. In a strange metropolis he rented a shabby flat together with a friend. Except for an old mattress there wasn’t much furniture in the apartment, or much space. I don’t know why, but he became infatuated with washing, even with washing himself in a bathtub.

Similar to Wang Ni and Li Hua, Ou Ya does not, at first, participate in society: he is an unmarried, unemployed man in a strange city. This is reflected in his private space. As soon as his public role in society changes, his private space changes with it. Starting out with bathing in a plastic box bought at the market, Ou Ya later has a bathtub made of bricks and mud “with porcelain pasted on the outside,” and at the end of the story he owns a dreamlike, self-designed bathroom:
Ou Ya instructed the renovation workers to tear down a wall and make one room out of the toilet and bedroom. He made the whole floor waterproof and then paved it with black and white veined marble. In this way, he owned what you could almost call a huge, extravagant, genuine bathroom, which I have only seen in movies from Western countries. In addition to a big, circular, and elegant curved bath with a massage function, the bathroom also had a sliding door of imported Spanish glass. At different places, small nozzles could wonderfully spray water vapor so that, whenever needed, Ou Ya could have a steam bath. Outside the glass door, but still inside the bathroom of course, was a TV, a phone, a couple of books, a deck chair, a bathrobe, a cabinet for towels, and a dartboard hanging on the wall. Now it had become Ou Ya’s custom, after bathing, to throw a handful of darts at the dartboard on the wall. When he finished throwing darts, his wife would just be about to come back from the fitness center.

Through the portrayals of Ou Ya’s ever more luxurious bathtubs, the reader comes to understand Ou Ya’s improving financial condition and social status: owning his first bathtub when he was unemployed, single and living in a shared shabby apartment, the second one when he had a girlfriend and lived in a two-room house with hall and toilet, and his last one when he was married with “his seventh girlfriend and the third of a stream of people who eventually married him” and living in a huge luxurious residence:

This [owning a bathtub] is of course very important, he told himself: firstly, he could use it to bathe, taking care of his hygiene; secondly, he could use it for enjoying himself, even though there only existed a little joy in his life, this was the place of life’s expectations; thirdly and most importantly, it was an emblem of his life’s upward movement, symbolizing each stage of his achievements of personal struggle.

Whereas for Wang Ni, the interaction between her role in the public and private space brings her in a downward spiral, for Ou Ya it works the other way around. His successes in public life provide him with the possibility to improve his bathroom, and the luxurious bathroom in its turn makes him wanted among his friends and his wife.

Having the perfect bathroom, Ou Ya hardly needs to leave it, and even invites the outside world into his bathroom. Firstly, his wife, who “was full of admiration for his fancy bathroom design,” and before long she starts inviting her girlfriends to visit their bathroom, “who in their turn brought their own husbands and boyfriends, roughly doubling the number of people visiting the bathroom.” Impressed by this luxurious bathroom, every visitor must of course follow suit, causing “a slight peak of renovated bathrooms among their acquaintances.”
The utopian bathroom provides Ou Ya with a place of refuge. Remarkably, it is a place that resembles a self-created miniature of today’s capitalist, consumption society. In contrast with Li Hua in “Moving House,” Ou Ya does not reject the “Shanghai norm” of success, money and status. He embraces Shanghai’s new consumerist culture, surviving and even succeeding in life. Ou Ya’s bathroom falls completely within the parameters that transforming Shanghai has set. It symbolizes one of its inbuilt escapist routes: a leisure facility.

The humorous, ironic undertone that permeates the story, however, reinforces the sense of a critical attitude towards Shanghai’s consumerist society. For example, when Ou Ya turns thirty-three he buys himself the following “birthday present”: “two bottles of imported shower gel and a luxurious residence of one hundred-and-eighty square meters.”

Whereas the characters in Candy want to be alone, or alone with their bodies, in the bathtub, to Ou Ya his bathing rituals are a fore- and afterplay to sex:

After his baths – if she was there – he would energetically have sex with his wife and afterwards return to his bathtub to take another bath. [...] After the last visitor left, Ou Ya switched off the light, and turned on candles in the full area of one hundred-and-eighty square meters. There were even more candles in the bathroom than in the bedroom.

Moreover, Ou Ya’s bathing fetish is completely intertwined with the love between him and his wife. Not only in a physical sense, but also mentally: they share their most intimate moment when he reveals his bathing life story, deeply moving his wife:

When their one-year wedding anniversary arrived Ou Ya made an exception and made love with his wife before taking his bath. Afterwards they lay on the bed and Ou Ya fondled his small belly that already showed some proud flesh. Eventually, he told his wife all kind of personal bathing stories that he hadn’t told anyone in forty years.

His wife couldn’t help but develop an intense emotion, almost worshipping her husband’s ability of bathing like this and his struggle until now. Really beautiful, she said. After she said that they made love again. If we wouldn’t have known they were making love when we heard the conversation below, it could have looked like people who were having a perfect good talk in a very quiet pub.

“Really good.”
“Not yet good enough.”
“Now then what more… would you like, huh?”
“I’d like to dig… a swimming pool… in the house… that’s my life’s goal.”
“Oh… that’s great… that’s… great. Well then… I can swim every… day.”
“That’s… not called… swimming.”

“What? Oh! But… then what… then what… is it called? Eh?”

“That’s exactly… what’s called… ba-ath-ing.”

**The Story of Apple**

Just like Ou Ya, Apple’s biggest dream in *Candy* is to own a bathtub. However, since he has always been poor, for a long time his only option was to fantasize about the bathrooms he saw in magazines. So, when Apple is finally able to buy a small children’s bathtub (reminding of Ou Ya’s first “plastic box”) he immediately grabs the opportunity, even though his bathroom is too small and doesn’t have any ventilation. He doesn’t care: “he could spend a long, long time in the bathtub. Every day it was the same” (170). Apple is convinced he is “condemned to solitude” and cannot find any fulfillment in his life. His inability to connect with his environment is now “solved” by the little bathtub that provides him with an escape from the outside world. All he wants is to retreat to his little hot bath, a regression to a womblike paradise, a carefree existence. Bathing is a purely sensuous experience for him:

And there were other times when he felt like a tisane of *pangdahai* [胖大海; Chinese herb], slowly swelling in the tub like steeping leaves, and he would stand up, the droplets of water rolling down his skin and dripping into the bath one by one. This made him feel like a towel that was being wrung out.

He felt clean.

Then he might trim his nails, eyebrows, pubic hair, and the hair around his anus. (170)

Apple’s longing for sensuous stimulation can also be related his fondness for the four seasons:

Shanghai was like his lover. He took me to so many streets and boulevards. He said that Shanghai’s four seasons were so distinct, and that this always kept his senses sharp. He said, Especially in the winter. (256)

It is as if the city and nature mirror each other in variety and changeability: both trigger new sensations.

When one compares the new Shanghai apartment blocks with the old neighborhoods of small alleyways and one-storey wooden houses, one of the most noticeable differences is a lack of sensory stimuli surrounding the former. In the old neighborhoods, one can hear the neighbors’ noises, smell their cooking or laundry, and even look in.

Tuan ([Yi-Fu] 1974: 245) states that in the modern metropolis, people rely more and more on sight, at the cost of their other senses, i.e. hearing, smelling, tasting,
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and touching, “for they require proximity and slow pace to function.” Tuan (1974: 10) further claims that, because of their focus on sight, space becomes for people “bounded and static, a frame or matrix for objects,” and that specifically smelling and hearing “stir emotion”:

The person who just ‘sees’ is an onlooker, a sightseer, someone not otherwise involved with the scene. The world perceived through the eyes is more abstract than that known to us through other senses.

In his profession as a video artist, Apple thus perceives his surroundings with some distance, whereas at home he relies on his other senses: staying in bed most of the day and “soaking in a bathtub” (which “was his favorite thing”) when he was awake. Even more so, since Apple “can’t see a thing” without his contact lenses or glasses:

But he always stood in front of the bathroom mirror without his glasses, often wondering whether the man that other people saw when they looked at him was the same person he saw when he looked at himself. After all, other people’s eyes weren’t his eyes, and without the aid of a mirror or contacts, he couldn’t have seen himself with his own eyes. […] Water was his most trusted mirror, and gazing at the hot water that quietly enrobed him like an invisible sugar coating, he would lie back, counting his toes, often counting eleven or twelve toes floating level with the surface of the bathwater. (169-70)

Apple needs a mirror to confirm his own existence, which reveals his deep-rooted insecurity. As soon as he has reassured himself of his existence, he wonders who he is and how others perceive him. However, Apple avoids confrontation with other people by staying at home during the day and retreating to his bathroom. He prefers to rely on himself and the water in his bathtub as “his most trusted mirror,” even though this means he counts eleven or twelve toes.

One day, Apple is found dead in his bathtub. It appears that the poor bathing conditions caused his death:

He’d always wanted a comfortable bathtub; the one he has now was his first. The bathroom was too small, but he insisted on putting a child’s bathtub in there. The bathroom really was much too small, and there was no ventilation. He didn’t die because of fate; he died because of an accident, and he died because of his standard of living. He died in the cold and cloudy Shanghai winter. […] He died in the first bathtub he’d ever owned. It doesn’t matter, but he’d already possessed countless bathtubs – in the magazines he saved, and in his mind. The world is so big, but he never even went to Hong Kong. He always said, I really just want to go abroad to see what it’s like. He didn’t even have a computer, but it didn’t matter, because he had been everywhere and seen
everything in his mind, through information he’d come by in every way imaginable, and through his eyes.

I held Apple. His body was full of water. His expression was so peaceful, but I suddenly felt overwhelmed by countless regrets. (256-7)

The two things that kept life bearable, comfortable and stimulating for Apple seem to betray him in the end: he dies in a bathtub, “in the cold and cloudy Shanghai winter.” Moreover, the story of Apple brings to mind the Greek myth of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. Unable to stop gazing at himself, Narcissus died next to the pool.

In her descriptions of Apple, the narrator repeatedly stresses his poor financial conditions. On the one hand, she claims that “it doesn’t matter” since he could possess all he wants in fantasy, just like she herself does by writing fiction. On the other hand, she reveals the fact that wealth is indispensable for surviving in contemporary Shanghai. As the narrator tells us, Apple’s longing for a luxury he couldn’t afford eventually cost him his life: “He died because of his standard of living.”

At high school, Apple was severely bullied by the older students. They forced him to give them blowjobs:

They used to stand in a line, and it all left a taste in my mouth that will never completely go away. [...] Maybe that was where I first became excited by men’s penises. But that doesn’t mean I liked what they did to me. It’s important that you understand this. (163)

In this period, Apple falls in love with Kiwi because he protects him against the bullies, but after a short love affair Kiwi rejects him as well. Having been sexually abused in his youth, Apple’s relationship with his body is ambivalent, as he laments one day to Hong: “As long as there is chaos, there will always be hope for Truth and Beauty. And what kept us from attaining these things, is our bodies (257).”

In his bath, the body – otherwise a burden to him – becomes weightless. The bath makes him feel pure and chaste. Ironically, Hong says somewhere else in the novel: “those who die young, leave a beautiful body,” in a variation on the famous saying by American actor John Derek: “Live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse.” So the question is: was it really an accident or did Apple want to die, as the following seems to suggest?

It doesn’t matter, but he left with a calm expression. It doesn’t matter, but soaking in the bathtub was his favorite thing. It doesn’t matter, but when he smoked those cheap, lousy cigarettes of his, he would often say, What’s the point of worrying? We all have to die sometime.
Wang Ni, Li Hua, Ou Ya and Apple

At first sight, Apple and Ou Ya have a lot in common. They both love to bathe and in fact spend most of their time in the bathtub. When retreating into their bathroom they focus on sensual experiences and their body. One could say they both create a utopian private space, “in order to offset the exterior chaos of the metropolis and regain an integrated, autonomous sense of self,” to quote Visser (2002: 71) again.

However, whereas the story of Ou Ya ends in a romantic scene, Apple’s story ends tragically. Ou Ya, eventually rich and married, has great success with his luxurious bathtub and even allows other people to enter, while lonely, poor Apple dies alone in his tiny bathtub. Ou Ya changed with transforming Shanghai, while Apple fails to cope with life in the transforming city. At the same time, it’s significant to stress again that the tone of Ou Ya’s story is dripping with irony.

Not only Ou Ya succeeds in creating an idyllic private space for himself; Li Hua does so as well. Moreover, in both cases public space and private space eventually interpenetrate, the difference being that whereas Ou Ya brings the public (other people) into his private realm (bathroom), Li Hua brings the private (his home) into the public realm (garbage dump). One could argue that Ou Ya’s and Li Hua’s nomadic lives in the city – both moved house many times – ultimately end in a breakdown of the dichotomy between private and public space: Ou Ya’s bathroom and Li Hua’s home have both become simultaneously private and public domain.

Although both Ou Ya and Li Hua escape into their chosen utopias, these utopias are complete opposites: an old, broken army truck in a desolate garbage dump, versus a huge, beautiful, luxurious, self-designed bathroom. Both places are symbolic of the modern metropolis in general, and Shanghai in particular. The luxurious bathroom advertising the newly attained private space is associated with conspicuous consumption, privacy, sensuous physicality and modern hygiene, and the dump site is associated with mainly the dark side of contemporary urban life: waste, pollution, dirt, and decay.

Wang Ni fails to form any social relationships, and neither is she able to create a private space or experience intimacy. Remarkably, Li Hua and Wang Ni find their paradise in the same kind of environment: a toilet and a garbage dump, both associated with waste. So, both characters experience the outside world as dystopias and find their utopia in the darker sides of contemporary urban life.

Apple and Li Hua have more in common than Apple and Ou Ya. While Ou Ya is happily married, both Apple and Li Hua are alone: Apple being rejected by Kiwi, and Li Hua being divorced. Furthermore, they both fruitlessly search for fulfillment in modern urban life but appear incapable of adapting to the new Shanghai. But they do escape: Apple literally into death, and Li Hua through a literally fantastic end to his story. Apple dies with a body full of water, while Li Hua’s bone-dry body shrivels down to a rag of dried skin.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

The transformation of Shanghai has shattered old, collective certainties, and the individual has to find their bearings anew. Space that used to be more uniform, restricted and regimented becomes fluid, heterogeneous, and a locus of desire, experimentation and escape. The relationship of the self to the world is redefined. Meaning, self-worth, one’s place, then, are no givens, but things the individual has to find and fight for on their own. The response of the characters in the works discussed here is to escape into self-chosen places within the space of Shanghai, varying from public nightlife to private homes, and the most private space within those homes: the bathroom. All provide (temporary) refuges to claim a sense of self.

In the final analysis, the spaces Jin Haishu’s characters escape into turn out to be public as well as private. In addition, Mian Mian’s protagonist in Candy escapes by transforming her private life into a public product (a book) and Panda’s protagonist escapes by becoming an intrinsic part of public life. In other words, the categories of public and private eventually collapse; a perfect mirror of a city in transition where all is in flux.