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THE SHAPE OF A CITY CHANGES FASTER THAN THE HUMAN HEART CAN TELL

The old Paris is gone (the shape of a city
changes faster than the human heart can tell)

I can only see those frail booths in the mind’s eye,
those piles of rough-cut pillars, and capitals,
the weeds, the massive greening blocks, that used to lie
water-stained: the bric-a-brac piled in shop windows.

[…]  

Paris changes! But nothing, in my melancholy,
moves. New hotels, scaffolding, stone blocks,
old suburbs, everything, becomes allegory,
to me: my memories are heavier than rocks.

Charles Baudelaire (1859), in “The Swan”
(translation by Tony Kline)

No two Shanghais are alike. Besides being a geographical location we can point out
on a map and visit, to stroll along its alleys and grand boulevards, Shanghai is so
much more than this physical place of bricks and mortar. Like any other city, it is a
dynamic, socially-constructed world, informed by historical and cultural practices,
an enclosed place of experience or “a state of mind,” as Chicago sociologist Robert
Park (1915) famously put it. Most of all, though, it is a mental picture that differs
from mind to mind.

Crucially, Shanghai is a city in flux. In recent years, workers and machines have
frantically destroyed parts of the city to build a new one as imagined and designed
by policy makers, urban planners and architects. But “the shape of a city changes
faster than the human heart can tell,” as Baudelaire observes. Indeed, the mental
maps and personal memories of Shanghai’s citizens are not as easily erased. On the
contrary, as Baudelaire so beautifully expresses: the new evokes the old, since the
sight of a new building may bring back the memory of what used to be there in that
particular spot and thereby turn it into a trope of both the passing of time and the
overwhelming and destructive forces of urban renewal. Applied to Shanghai, a
skyscraper designed to meet the growing demand for office property may symbolize
the city’s booming economy to some, while to others the sight of this very building
may bring back childhood memories of the old neighborhood it replaced, becoming a symbol of lost youth and vanishing ways of life.

The transforming city becomes a mythical entity supercharged with meaning, in which, in Baudelaire’s words, “new hotels, scaffolding, stone blocks, old suburbs, everything, becomes allegory,” to the people living in this fast-changing environment. It is precisely through literary imaginings of the city in the midst of transformation that a glimpse of this “city of feeling” (Cather 1976: 24) is revealed. More than just a depiction of a geographical place, fictional Shanghai offers distinct representations of the city as it is uniquely experienced by its citizens: the city of feeling rising out of the city of fact.

Non-fictional writings on the transformation of Shanghai are often illustrated by a picture that features demolished longtang houses contrasted with the glittering skyscrapers of Pudong in the background, a visual shorthand any reader will understand: old Shanghai is making way for a new, global city. In the literary works discussed in this study, too, Shanghai’s past and future and their respective symbols, longtang and Pudong, frequently appear. But the associations they trigger in the narrators are manifold.

The longtang houses are perhaps the most striking example of how the stories’ narrated buildings are turned into tropes with very diverse meanings. In nostalgic portrayals of 1930s Shanghai (chapter 4), the longtang’s beautifully, handcrafted ornaments and hybrid typography of Western and Chinese architecture confirm a collectively remembered cosmopolitan city of jazz, fashion, and beautiful Shanghai ladies (Chen Danyan, Shanghai Memorabilia), while in other nostalgic portrayals the longtang provides a setting for a communal ‘Shanghai way of life’ that is now under threat (Wang Anyi, The Song of Everlasting Sorrow). In all these cases, the longtang embodies Shanghai identities, one disappearing (communal), the other reappearing (cosmopolitan).

In this way, Shanghai’s unique “triple historical framework” (Abbas 2002: 41) – i.e. Treaty Port era, under communism, contemporary Shanghai – is portrayed through the particulars of the old buildings’ appearance. In Yin Huifen’s “Hongkou Anecdote,” for example, one can read the Japanese occupation of the Hongkou district during the Treaty Port period in this description of a former Japanese club:

On the top of the building’s façade, white marble carvings adorned the high arched windows, radiating extreme luxury and mystery, whilst also exuding something slightly sinister, very different from the peaceful atmosphere of the residential Triangle Quarter. (47)

In their turn, in Chen Danyan’s and Wang Anyi’s stories the old buildings’ traces of neglect and destruction signify the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution, respectively. Likewise, in Ding Liying’s “Come Over,” the narration of the rundown shikumen “without sanitation, without coal gas” signifies contemporary Shanghai with its increasing class differences:
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In the luxurious restaurants in front, public money is consumed for two- or three thousand-Yuan banquets, while in the shikumen houses at the back, people have to eat sitting on their beds (41)

As for Shanghai’s future, whenever the emblem of modernity Pudong appears in a story, it is seen from afar. Instead of deconstructing the sign Pudong by portraying it as a common urban environment of office buildings, shops, and apartment blocks, a neighborhood where people live and move around, the narratives insistently reproduce the one-dimensional image of a skyline, revealing a distancing attitude towards the sign’s reference. “These signs of prosperity had nothing to do with us, the people who live among them,” asserts CoCo in Weihui’s Shanghai Babe: “A car accident can kill us, but the city’s prosperous, invincible silhouette is like a planet, in perpetual motion, eternal” (13). And when the mother in Chen Danyan’s “Black-and-White Mosaic” looks out the window of a newly restored Bund building, the narrator says:

Through the window, she could see Pudong’s glittering skyscrapers, covered with flickering neon lights and advertisements for Japanese electronics. […] An all-embracing drive towards the future swept the city again. But the strange window did not seem to be part of that outside world; and neither did it seem a part of the building’s interior or exterior; just like the mother herself. (29)

Like so many protagonists, the mother does not feel connected to the Pudong skyline and everything it stands for, but she does relate to the Bund building, albeit in a very personal way. In her case, it evokes traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution, memories “heavier than rocks” which, no matter how the contemporary city tries to erase them, still linger on in “the mind’s eye” of its citizens.

It is not urban change itself that makes Shanghai such an interesting case study. It is the sheer scale, scope and speed of Shanghai’s transformation that is extraordinary. For this reason, Shanghai functions as both a magnifying glass and an accelerator, sparking the literary imagination into activity. Perhaps this explains why some of the works under discussion do not dwell on Shanghai’s particularity or local culture, but focus on the mental impact of living in the densely populated metropolis in general, and the effects of far-reaching change on people’s inner lives and their bodies in particular.

Urban experiences of loneliness, angst, and alienation are often depicted through characters feeling lost in the urban crowd and revealing an inner desire to escape from daily life in the outside world (chapter 5). Some are gripped by a fear of anonymity and insignificance, such as Hong in Mian Mian’s Candy, whose anxiety of being absorbed by the crowd makes her dream to be “put on playbills all over Shanghai” (186). These characters claim public space for their private expression, often to the extent that it turns into a platform for exhibitionistic self-enactment. In other works, lonely characters turn into an intrinsic part of their urban environment
by escaping into the crowd, exposing the bruising anonymity of life in the modern metropolis to the full (Mian Mian, *Panda*), or they create their own utopian private spaces where they focus on sensuous experiences and their body, whether in a dirty garbage dump or a luxurious bathroom (Jin Haishu, *Deep Anxiety*). These stories compellingly reveal how the city’s soaring economy comes at a price: increasing class differences, unemployment, crime, pollution, and its concomitant psychological effects, such as depression and drug addiction.

When placing the main settings of the stories in the collection *City Map* on an actual city map of Shanghai, one remarkable outcome was the discrepancy between female and male authors (chapter 2). Whereas nostalgic works dealing with Shanghai identity are predominantly female-authored, male authors seem more inclined to Mao nostalgia, as reflected in the Lower Corner stories that have humble dwellings and the factory workplace as their main locations (Cheng Xiaoying, Li Qigang, Zhang Min). These works do not so much respond to the city’s urban renewal craze as reflect on China’s changes at large, i.e. social, economic, and cultural. Sassen’s (1991) claim that in the globalizing world, cities have replaced the nation-state in giving people a sense of place and belonging is not borne out by these stories. Instead, these works express concern with a spiritual void its narrators experience in China’s modern consumer society.

Moreover, the male authors are confronted with a commercialized society in which the male intellectual has lost his formerly central position and now has to sell himself in order to be read. This is something at which female authors prove much more adept than their male counterparts, who in turn are quick to blame these women for ‘selling their bodies.’ To these women writers, however, commercialization has provided an opportunity to claim a space for self-expression and gain an equal social and/or economic position to that of men. In particular the young, bestselling female authors strongly identify with the reemerging cosmopolitan city, as shown in their chosen nicknames, such as ‘Shanghai babes / girls / ladies / roses,’ and the comeback of the trope of Shanghai as *femme fatale* (chapter 3). Needless to say, there are some telling exceptions to this rule – *Sandbed* by best-selling male author Ge Hongbing is a remarkable example. Nevertheless, despite its evident similarities with the works by the ‘Shanghai babes,’ Ge’s novel turns out to center on Chinese culture as well, rather than just the city of Shanghai.

I have focused on literary works written by authors born between the 1940s and the 1970s. But as befits Shanghai, city of incessant transformation, younger generations reflect it differently again. The most interesting exponent, ranked 48th place in *New Statesman*’s “The World’s 50 Most Influential Figures of 2010” and nominated for *Time Magazine*’s “100 most influential people of 2010,” is Han Han. High school dropout and rally racer Han Han’s first novel, *Triple Doors* 三重门 (2001), criticizes the Chinese school system through the story of a third-year junior school student. With over two million copies printed, it is said to be China’s best-selling literary work of the last two decades. Han Han’s relationship with his native city is ambiguous: “I truly love this city because it has a lot of places that I can
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reminisce in. But I also think Shanghai could be better, that’s why I also hate this city” (CNN interview 2010). This is also reflected in his novels that mostly have mid-sized anonymous cities as their setting.

Despite often-heard criticism that the younger generation behaves like uncritical consumers, Han Han is in fact a much more politically outspoken and socially committed figure than, for example, most of the Post-1970s authors. Thanks to the income from his books and his racing career, Han Han has been able to create his own literary space where he can express himself much more freely than his colleagues. Besides, as “China’s most popular blogger” (The New Yorker, 4 July 2001), Han Han uses the Internet as his platform, from which he looks critically at Shanghai and the wider world. His perspective is thus both local and global. Hence, Han Han can be regarded as one of the first literary manifestations of Shanghai as truly global city.

How things will develop, and how they will be reflected in literature, no-one can predict. But the work of the imagination is never finished. Encompassing individual and collective memories, local and global urban culture, and the mental impact of urban transformation, the number of imaginable Shanghais is infinite.