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Shanghai Image: Critical Iconography, Minor Literature, and the Un-Making of a Modern Chinese Mythology

Xudong Zhang*

I

In “Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism,” Raymond Williams demonstrates how the historical symbiosis between the modern and the urban can be reconstructed, both historically and conceptually, in five successive steps. It all starts with an historical experience whose novelty has all but escaped us: a “crowd of strangers” on the street which is unknown, indeed, mysterious. Within this crowd emerges the lonely individual, whose paradox of self-realization in isolation culminates in an “extreme and precarious form of consciousness,” namely the monad of subjectivity. The third moment can be found in the imagined objectivity confronting the new-born subjectivity, which Williams calls the “concealment” and “impenetrability” of the city. This would be the London in Conan Doyle—foggy, dark, intricate, a huge crime scene necessitating an isolated but penetrating rational intelligence that finds its form in the detective novel.1

Williams’s conceptualization of the city/modernity then takes a sharp, dialectic turn, as the alienating concentration of men and women in the city also gives rise to a new unity or “human solidarity.” Cast in this light, the image of the mob turns into that of the “masses” and the “multitude” with democratic and revolutionary potentials. Finally, the modern metropolis becomes “the place where new social and economic and cultural relations, beyond both city and nation in their older senses, were beginning to be formed” (MP 44). The initial strangeness seems to

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find its sublation in “the vitality, the variety, the liberating diversity and mobility of the city” (MP 43). Williams’s tone is not a celebratory one. Immediately he points out that one cannot separate the new metropolitan form from the uneven development of capitalism, from imperialism and colonialism whose “magnetic concentration of wealth and power” in imperial capitals underlies the “cosmopolitan access to a wide variety of subordinate cultures” (MP 45). This hierarchy is not understood in merely military terms, but “in terms of development and thence of perceived enlightenment and modernity” (MP 44). All this, however, does not invalidate the cosmopolitan culture of the bourgeois metropolis, as the latter’s complexity and sophistication of social relations are usually “supplemented by exceptional liberties of expression” where “diversity and dissent [take] hold” (MP 44).

This duality of the metropolitan character shows a family resemblance that leads to two crucial questions of modernity. One is the still mystifying operations of commodity, market, and capital, whose unrelenting raw force as well as nimble capacity to generate new forms, desires, and ideologies remain at the center of a monumental intellectual enterprise of historical cryptography, phenomenology, and narratology. In this respect, Jacques Derrida’s astonishing work of 1994, The Specters of Marx, is not only a timely reminder of the ghost of an oppressed past that never left us, but first and foremost an intellectually conscientious evocation of the ghost, indeed, a specterology of Capital itself, which must inspire a new reading of the city: it is impossible to have a fruitful reading of the modern metropolis without a historical-material analysis of capitalism.2 This leads to the second point of reading the metropolis, which is simultaneously a reading of culture at its most intricate and monumental. In his “Theses on Philosophy of History” (1940), Walter Benjamin observes that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”3 In the urban context, violence goes far beyond the brutal physical destruction, reconstruction, and decay of cities throughout their existence, or the institutionalized control or “administration” of their residents. It is to be understood not only in terms of economic and power relations underscoring the city as a text and a culture monument, but also in the realm of the city’s symbolic representation and organization, in terms of the willful erasure of community, experience, memory, and narrative by the victorious conquerors who, as Benjamin tells us, form a chain of succession of power, by which not only the “cultural treasures” themselves but their transmission from one generation to another are tainted (I 75). No other socio-cultural artifice fits more pertinently in the Benjaminian concept of the human cultural heritage, from which a...
historical-materialist must strive to keep a “cautious detachment” and which she must “contemplate with horror” as much as with admiration and fascination.

Williams’s reflections do not stop here, however. Instead, the new urban form reached at the end of a historical description serves for him as a starting point for a new round of formal-historical analysis, this time the site of contention being culture in a more narrow but crucial sense—form. Metropolis as form is for Williams not a social custom, but a “community of medium” to be shaped and reshaped by generations of immigrants, literally and metaphorically speaking. In this process, the formal history of the metropolis is not an end, aesthetic or otherwise, but opens up new critical vistas by replaying the contradictions of social history with heightened psychological, artistic, and linguistic fluidity, intensity, and durability. Thus it is quite obvious that the ultimate theoretical interest of Williams’s discussion of the city overlaps with his subtle but ruthlessly historical reading of Modernism, the centrality of which is the question concerning universality and change:

The power of metropolitan development is not to be denied. The excitements and challenges of its intricate processes of liberation and alienation, contact and strangeness, stimulation and standardization, are still powerfully available. But it should no longer be possible to present these specific and traceable processes as if they were universals, not only in history but as it were above and beyond it. The formulation of the modernist universals in every case is a productive but imperfect and in the end fallacious response to particular conditions of closure, breakdown, failure and frustration. From the necessary negations of these conditions, and from the stimulating strangeness of a new and (as it seemed) unbonded social form, the creative leap to the only available universality—of raw material, of medium, of process—was impressively and influentially made. (MP 47)

What has been captured by early modernists like Baudelaire as the central task of the modern poetic intuition into the modern big city, namely the perception of the eternal in the ephemeral, and the ephemeral in the eternal, becomes a critical, analytical question in Williams. For him, the new problematic seems to be a subtle yet powerful tension within the metropolitan experience, a tension formed between its simultaneous tendencies to liberate and to alienate, to stimulate and to standardize, to differentiate and to reify. The social, intellectual, and artistic dilemma of the modern as such, in this context, unfolds as it is being brutally overdetermined by historical immediacy while longing to stay “above and beyond it.”
II

The emergence of Shanghai as a subject—in socioeconomic history but especially in its symbolic reproduction—can be considered with reference to Williams’s notion of the politics of the modern as a politics of the universal. It is widely observed that in this most modern (the meaning of the word now becomes a question rather than a given) of all Chinese cities, different ideologies and material forces converge, take hold, and battle each other over physical space and population as well as their representations. What is less discussed, however, is the historical condition that gives rise to and shapes the urban text of Shanghai and its unique intensity in both stylistic and political terms.

In a prosaic poem called “The Spring of Shanghai,” written in 1931, Zhou Leshan, a now obscure writer, depicts his personal encounter with the modern big city in a way readily reminiscent of Baudelaire’s prose poem, “Loss of Halo,” in his The Spleen of Paris. With the simple poetic-narrative design of a bored, melancholic, yet still sentimental city-dweller looking in vain for the traces of spring in an inhuman city where Nature is all but done away with, the author wanders across the urban space to contrast its alienation and decadence with an absent ideal. Even the plot is similar to Baudelaire’s fictional yet autobiographical poet figure looking for his lost halo amidst the life threatening traffic in the streets of Paris. Whereas Baudelaire’s poet ends up seeing the loss of his halo as a bad omen, Zhou Leshan’s first-person narrator finally finds the sign of the spring but only in the market place. At the end of “The Spring of Shanghai,” the narrator buys an overpriced oleander from a mean street vendor and then goes home on foot as he can no longer afford a bus ticket.

By enumerating the obvious reasons why people in every walk of life in the modern city are either denied or barricade themselves against even the faintest exposure to Nature, the author concludes that nobody in Shanghai can ever see the spring. Instead, they live in an urban enclosure which seamlessly condemns them to a dazzling succession of events—sound film, theater, horse race, department store sales, gambling, dance hall parties, not to mention business fluctuations, wars, and urban crimes, all of which are overwhelmingly reported and advertised in the newspapers—that their coping with city life is no more than powerlessly absorbing the shock of these events in their isolated individual and private domain, cut off from the very social interactions that make the city possible in the first place. As a man of letters longing for connection with a larger community (for which the spring or Nature stands as an allegorical substitution), the author finds his everyday life reduced to reading newspapers all day long: “Most of the readers simply
read ‘Local News’ as if they were novels, and I am one of them. For instance, kidnapping stories read like Water Margins (Shuihuzhuan); stories on opium, gambling, and prostitution read like The Dreams of Shanghai (Haishang fanhuameng); news on adultery and polygamy read like The Soul of Jade Pear (Yulihun); the bitter lawsuit papers brought by those abandoned women read like Dreams of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng); advertisements for calligraphy and art works read like Scholars (Rulin waishi)” (75). Among the many things the author singles out, his reading of newspaper stories as if they were old-fashioned fiction (lao xiaoshuo) is worth noting. It highlights a peculiar way the shock-experience and the excessive stimuli of the modern big city are absorbed by the Shanghai urbanite through a narrative and psychological mediation between the traditional and the modern. The free allegorical substitution of things that are radically discontinuous in sociohistorical time and space indicates the abruptness and the lack of mediation of the Shanghai modern as a daily experience, as though old-fashioned fiction still constitutes the “background of the Shanghai educated class” as they are thrown into the whirlwind of the city’s new material civilization. The discontinuity highlighted by the ad hoc allegorical substitution between the old and the new manifests itself throughout “The Spring of Shanghai” as extreme economic, social, class and even racial disparity and contradiction. “Spring may have arrived in those graceful parks in the foreign concessions; but they are reserved for white people and the upper class Chinese and not something to be enjoyed by those who live in the filthy longtang buildings” (74). It is obvious that, for the author, what is unmistakably and distressingly modern about Shanghai is not only its urban population’s being “sucked into a machinery (moxing) in which they are condemned to non-stop work” (72), but also its internal fragmentation—it is the strangeness, isolation, and utter incompatibility between the different parts of an internally fractured whole that is the modern metropolis.

The same kind of allegorical mediation by “old-fashioned” imageries can also be found in Zhang Ailing’s writings, but working in the opposite direction. Growing up in Shanghai and Hong Kong, Zhang belongs to the first generation of modern Chinese writers whose life experience was essentially and thoroughly urban—Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly writers, as well as their Vernacular Revolutionary opponents such as Lu Xun and Mao Dun were immigrants with rural or small town backgrounds. But Zhang’s love of the radically urban requires an artistic frame, a poetic filter which is formed through a unique, often ironical continuity with traditional taste and sensibilities. In a personal essay entitled “Amusing Anecdotes of Apartment Living” (“Gongyu shenghuo jiqu”), she writes about how much she likes the noises of the city, which
sounds to her to be “more poetic than the whispers of pine trees and the howling of the ocean on the pillow”; and how “but only the noises of the trolley car can put [her] into sleep.” In a way reminiscent of Proust, she remarks: “The urban mind has as its background the stripped curtains and draperies, the bland, white strips of which would be a trolley car in motion—smooth and level, it is a river of noises, gently flowing into our sub-consciousness.” Those who are familiar with Zhang’s unrelentingly refined style know the extent to which her language and sensibility are shaped by “old-fashioned” Chinese literature. The nearly suffocating density and intricacy of her intertextual relationship with the latter, as well as the impenetrable distance of irony of her writings, seem to lie at the core of her intimate representation of the city. And it is Zhang Ailing who observes rather matter-of-factly that Shanghai is a twisted product of the overlap of cultures old and new; that the Shanghainese are simply “traditional Chinese put through the grind mill of the modern, high-pressured life.” This, conversely, also means that for Zhang Ailing, every modern Chinese is technically a Shanghainese. It may not be too reductive a generalization to argue that the intensity of Shanghai modern comes not so much from its actualized modern enclaves, but from its preliminary, precarious, and probative status. The intensity of its representation, then, seems always to lie in a perpetuated encounter with the city—a traumatic or ecstatic one depending on the particular angle of entry. From the beginning passages of Mao Dun’s critical-realist novel Midnight (Ziye) onward, Shanghai has become the contact zone par excellence, whose edginess and provisionality are constitutive of its increasingly mythologized perception as the embodiment of the imagined universal of modernity as such.

The obsession with which Shanghai searches for a self-image—in a totality as well as in endless details and fragments—is matched in the history of modern world culture probably only by that of Paris, even though its modernity in both material and representational terms has never reached the Parisian level of articulation and elaboration. For instance, Victor Hugo’s majestic chapter, “A Bird’s Eye View of Paris” in Notre Dame de Paris, Balzac’s panoramic study of the Parisian “custom,” or Proust’s endless mimesis of the empty human clatter in the Parisian salon do not have their equivalent in the history of modern Chinese literature (although the literary sketches in the work of Mao Dun, Zhang Ailing, the new-perceptionist writers, and especially Wang Anyi’s writings in the 1990s make a comparative reading possible). Neither has Shanghai been so thoroughly and meticulously painted and photographed as Paris has been by Edouard Manet and Eugene Atget.

Nonetheless, the radical unevenness, heterogeneity, and self-contradiction of the Shanghai modern, its sharp contrast to the rest of the
country, and its precarious, transient if not marginal place in the capitalist world system, seem to perpetuate the city’s insatiable desire for its coherent picture, its essence, its nature. In contrast to the socio-cultural density of the Parisian or New York modern,8 the urban text of Shanghai seems to achieve a level of formal and ideological intensity mainly through the feebleness of an utterly schizophrenic and constantly threatened modernity in material, social, and political senses. Therefore, it seems to me that the centrality of a critical study of Shanghai urban modernity does not lie in a derivative inventory of the modern and the metropolitan, as the attempt to describe a modern-looking Shanghai often slips into an unreflected nominalism in urban sociology and cultural studies, which substitutes a historical analysis of the urban text with a kind of bean-counting of the signs—architectures, consumer fashions, entertainment, literary styles, and so forth—that will fit in the stereotypical image of the modern metropolis.

I would suggest that, rather, the intensity of the Shanghai modern, underdeveloped in almost every aspect, is more fully articulated in the intellectual-ideological battles of the modern and the universal, in the brutal, unrelenting succession of discursive and political paradigms throughout the history of modern China. In other words, the Shanghai modern is not thoroughly modern, but modern in an uneven and over-coded way in that the very concept of the modern is always subject to fundamental suspicion, challenge, and critique while passionately embraced and defended; it is always radically relativized and absolutized at the same time, and each tendency only feeds the ideological fervor of its opposite. In this convoluted and chaotic time-space, modernity as such is always a sheer fiction—as ideology and utopia at the same time—to be read in a diverse and contradictory context which necessarily destabilizes its mythological and ontological certainty while creating more reified—and in this sense, more modern—forms of mythologies and ontologies. In this sense, Shanghai may be a privileged site to witness the central dilemma of modernity as it is described by Max Horkeheimer and T. W. Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment: it is a historical process which enlightens by mythologizing; that Enlightenment always creates its own myth that is the mythology of the modern.9 Indeed, the unproductive mode of representing and reproducing Shanghai modernity mentioned above is itself part of this intellectual-ideological conflict, unwittingly or not, because the enjoyment of an imagined geographical adventure and cultural archeology can only be fully realized and justified in systematically rewriting not only the political history of modern China, but the history of its everyday world and private life as well.

The urban text of Shanghai is not only a product of different writing machines marking their forever deterritorializing territories; moreover,
it is itself a “body without organs” whose rhizomes and assemblages expand endlessly to maintain its own consistency and intensity. In other words, the Shanghai modern is always an already deterritorialized modern, and can be captured only in its flight to becoming something different, in its mutations and variations. The mythological picture of Shanghai, rather, is to compensate for this flight and absence, often by means of a metaphysical notion of the modern as such. By producing an intricate network of signs, images, and narratives, Shanghai, like other major modern metropolises, becomes a living creature whose existence is inseparable from and incomprehensible without its own mirror-images and myths. A critical reading of such a text has its goal not in seeking refuge in the psychological or mythological “interpretations,” but in grasping its politics by which the city as a sensuous abstraction captures its material relevance and forms its own fetishism. This is the reading of Kafka—and Paris as “the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” as well—exemplified by Walter Benjamin. Whereas others seek to argue that Kafka is to modernity what classical myths were to traditional society, Benjamin suggests that we take him “literally.” Thus he reads the omnipresent father-son relationship in Kafka not as a psychoanalytical trope, but as overdetermined by the juridical-political system in human history. Father is “the one who punishes”; “there is much to indicate that the world of the officials and the world of the fathers are the same to Kafka”(I 113).

To take Shanghai “literally,” then, is not to throw ourselves into the mass production of the city as a modern mythology which appears in its purest form in advertisement that saturates the urban space. Rather, it is to read the city against the grain to expose its ruthless and irreducible overdetermination by its changing material, social, and political context. More specifically, it means to read and write about Shanghai between, beneath, and beyond the existing genres, styles, and discourses to create the peculiar linguistic, intellectual, and political spaces for the deconcealment of the dualisms, ambiguities, overlaps, hybridities, and rifts rendered invisible by various grand narratives of history, including the anti-grand narrative rhetoric of returning to the private, the quotidian, the normal, which, as Peter Osborne observes, has become the greatest and least tolerant grand narrative of our times. If there is to be a “minor literature” of Shanghai, then it does not have a new ontological shelter in either intellectual schemes or in “apolitical” empiricism which invariably bears a hidden or not-so-hidden ideological edge. The material concreteness and allegorical multiplicity of history cannot be preserved merely by isolating a text, an event, or an epoch from abstract frameworks of concepts and ideologies. Rather, they can only be maintained by a critical effort to retain the historical tensions, passages,
and contingency of both continuity and discontinuity. The Benjaminian approach to the city shows as its historico-philosophical core a complex and productive notion of time, which is spelled out in his readings of Kafka: “What has been forgotten... is never something purely individual. Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the pre-historic world, forms countless, uncertain, changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products. Oblivion is the container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka’s stories presses toward the light” (I 131).

We may, in a Benjaminian spirit, consider a minor literature of Shanghai to be as much about forgetting as it is about memory, about a phenomenological and political restoration of the concrete images of Shanghai as they flare up in every historical moment of danger. What is to be achieved here is not so much a chronological account of the rich repertoire of the literary and visual representations of Shanghai, but rather a critical iconography which places the fragmented and multi-layered image of Shanghai in the allegorical mosaic of the modern and the ideological history of the universal. This means to wrestle with the mythological self-understanding of this modern metropolis as it is formed, circulated, and recycled in the competing and overlapping paradigms and discourses of modern Chinese history which is riddled with rupture, shock, repression, and phantasm. Viewed as a picture, a Bildung and Darstellung, the image of Shanghai returns the gaze of an historical contemplation. The aura generated in this exchange is not so much of a purported authenticity of the universally modern, be it the immediacy of Western enclaves or the everyday world of a home-grown urban middle class. Rather, it is the radically and irreducibly historical, whose mobility, complexity, and internal differentiation simultaneously construct and deconstruct the phantasmagoria of space, culture, and commodity.

III

A critical iconography of Shanghai must start with the historico-intellectual origin of the city as an image and a conception, which is something embedded in and symbiotic with the discourse of Chinese modernity. In 1904, Jingzhong ribao (The Tocsin), a newspaper controlled by the anti-Manchu revolutionaries and edited by Cai Yuanpei, among others, published an article called “The New Shanghai,” which identifies the city as the hope for a new Chinese civilization, a place which prefigures a “dazzlingly splendid new world in the heart of darkness.” The abstractness of such a utopian vision is, interestingly, supplemented
with a cartographical appearance of Shanghai. Rendered in flamboyant classical Chinese, such a geographical description highlights the city’s central place in the remapping of China in the new national consciousness and in the global space:

Where is this new world? It is in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River facing the East China Sea. The ocean currents knock at the coastline along the edges of the foothills which are flanked by Baoshan on the left and Chuansha on the right. With the Huangpu River circling nearby and the Tai Lake further inland forming its cushion, the region extends freely to the south toward the sea, encompassing a massive stretch of magnificent land. Riding the currents and protected by three islands, it occupies the center of a 15,000-li long coastline of East Asia, constituting the foremost city among the eighteen provinces of China proper. What is this place? It is called Shanghai. What a beautiful place! What an unthinkable fortune with such a natural environment?

From this point on, Shanghai could no longer be seen as a dubious place on the muddy river band infested with foreign devils, but as a spearhead of a nation’s new destiny in the modern age. The city upon which the coming “new world” depends, just as nations and empires, are not natural entities but human inventions, to be sure. It is as yet visible only on a mental map, and in the monumental human endeavor of cognitive mapping. Parallel with and indifferent to that is another chain of events which hinted the persistent development of a different kind of history: three years before Shanghai leaped into the consciousness of the revolutionaries, in 1901, Shenbao, the largest modern newspaper in Shanghai, already celebrated the publication of its ten thousandth issue. Three years after, in 1907, the Waibaidu or Wellsley Bridge was completed on the Suzhou River. On the early morning of March 5, 1908, Shanghai saw the first trolley car rolling out of the International Settlement to be greeted by a whole series of outlandish traffic accidents in the months to come. In the summer of 1909, electrically lighted gardens in foreign concessions became a favored rendezvous for Shanghai urbanites to spend the long nights. To compete with the better illuminated Western settlements and concessions (zujie) for commercial interests, evening markets (yeshi) were established in the Chinese city, followed by the first Commodity Exhibition (shangpin zhanlanhui) a few months later. In November of the same year, the North Train Station (Beihuochezhan) was completed to handle 20 cargo trains and a passenger flow of about one thousand per day. At the same time, the Shanghai Club (also known as the Royal Club, the English Club) was founded in a magnificent building on the Bund, boasting its 110 foot-long bar. Reserved only for Western merchants in Shanghai but sharing
its membership with other English clubs in Calcutta, Singapore, Hong Kong, Yokohama, Kobe, it was a reminder of Shanghai’s place on a different map and in a different kind of global space. By 1910, one year before the Revolution that overthrew the Qing Dynasty, Shanghai was already a city with over a million and a quarter people (including about fifteen thousand foreign, mostly Western, residents).

Despite the momentous growth of the city in the decades that followed, the New Culture intellectuals in the 1920s and 30s held a largely, sometimes intensely negative view of Shanghai. One year after the May Fourth Movement in 1919, Fu Sinian, still a Peking University student running the radical magazine New Wave (Xinchao), thinks that Shanghai “stinks” as it lacks social organization and originality, its residents capable of nothing more than imitation and bad taste. Zhou Zuoren, in a famous essay in 1926, defines Shanghai culture as a “culture of compradores, hooligans, and prostitutes,” whose superficiality, hasty-ness, and decadent excess constitute the polar opposite of a “rational and aesthetic” culture of an enlightened world of everyday life. Although Zhou attributes the tastelessness of Shanghai culture to its colonial origin and its over-commercialized environment, he does not see it as anything new but rather an “exaggeration of what is inherently vulgar in Chinese culture.” Chen Duxiu, a regular, scathing Shanghai basher, regarded the city as socially filthy and culturally fraudulent. Following this tradition, Qian Zhongshu sarcastically writes that “to expect Shanghai . . . to be a producer of culture would be to expect ideas to come out of body parts other than the brain;” and Liang Yuchun simply calls Shanghai a “dog.”

What strikes us in this iconographic survey of Shanghai, however, is the passivity of Shanghai as it is being “shaped and reshaped” in the changing “community of medium” of modern Chinese intellectuals and its ideological identity. Through exhaustive archive research, the Shanghai historian Xiong Yuezhi shows us that the naming, definition, and the becoming-of-image of Shanghai has been almost exclusively a feat among competing literary and artistic circles; that, beyond the narrowly defined “Shanghai School” as a style in fine art and Beijing opera in late Qing period, the “Haipai” title has never been accepted, let alone invented, by those who were in Shanghai, as it was invariably a pejorative label and was understood so. Despite some secondary writers such as Zhang Ziping, Ye Lingfeng, and Liu Na’ou, who were widely regarded as “Shanghai-style” writers, the “School” thus invented decidedly lacked leaders or followers. Lu Xun, for instance, flatly rejected both the “Beijing School” and the “Shanghai School” as meaningful signifiers. From a detached position, he tried to redirect the petty and misleading rivalry between the two to a more socially concrete understanding of
their economic and political conditions of possibility. He points out that Beijing was the imperial capital of Ming and Qing, and Shanghai is the concession to Western powers; whereas the capital city boasts a mob of officials, the foreign concessions are jammed with merchants. Hence his widely quoted observations: “In a nutshell, the ‘Beijing School’ consists of the lackeys of officialdom, and the ‘Shanghai School’ is made of the rented hands of the business class. . . . With officials looking down upon merchants being a time-honored Chinese custom, the Shanghai School tends to fall even lower in the eyes of the Beijing School.”

Lu Xun’s observations allow Xiong Yuezhi to comment on the revival of Shanghai as a cultural style and an intellectual discourse since the late 1980s. He maintains that, in the 1930s, there was nobody willing to accept the banner of the “Shanghai School”; yet half a century later, not only do the cultural circles of Shanghai become more than willing to accept it, they want to raise the banner sky high. In other words, unlike the debate in the thirties which was provoked by others, the current discussion on Shanghai is being waged by Shanghai residents themselves. Xiong then suggests that to reintroduce the Shanghai School as a subject for public discussion reflects the attempt by the Shanghainese to regain certain characteristics, a certain identity, and a certain lost glory, although, as he remarks, “it is a road taken by mistake” (HS 182).

Shanghai nostalgia as both an intellectual discourse and a cultural fashion reached the level of an obsessed frenzy only in the 1990s, with globalization (now a household word in Shanghai) mandating a new round of penetration of space and a fundamental temporal reconfiguration as well. But Xiong Yuezhi’s observations in late 1980s prove to be insightful. There is much that is interesting and productive in the recent media and scholarly rediscovery of Shanghai from underneath the master-narrative of Chinese Enlightenment and revolution, but the drive to restore the “authenticity” of a native urban and bourgeois everyday culture—as indicated by Cheng Naishan’s writings about old Shanghai, and by the culture industry producing the stereotypical images of old Shanghai for mass consumption—betrays an ideological fervor and metaphysical grammar, both of which rely on the same abstraction which subjected a large part of Shanghai—as a history of everyday life—into oblivion. This should turn our attention to the missing link in the historical continuity and discontinuity of the Shanghai image as a subject of a critical iconography.

It is a commonly held view that Shanghai remains an interesting subject of study so long as it is different. The difference is usually understood and measured vis-à-vis the rest of the country, contrasting Shanghai’s cosmopolitan glamour not so much with its dull provincialism as with its uniformity forged by Chinese socialism. But in this way the
conventional discourse on Shanghai reveals its ideological assumption that limits the scope of its historical and theoretical investigation. It is a revisionism intended to reverse the strong universal claim of the discourse of Chinese Enlightenment and revolution by an ideological counter-offensive, but without considering Chinese communism an integral part of the historical problematic of Chinese modernity. Content with a reunion between the 1990s and the 1930s, the revisionist discourse repudiates the ideological formulations of the previous paradigm but inherits its philosophical syntax while constructing a new picture of Shanghai as the image of the universal. But nowhere does the image of Shanghai pertain more intimately to the politics of the universal and become more articulated than when a sudden release of sociopolitical energy erupts to change radically not only the sociopolitical landscape, but the mental form by which the physical world is perceived and understood. The Shanghai image is riddled with internal ruptures, gaps, and overlaps between different socio-geological layers and temporal structures. Its political and discursive construction, its mythological image-formation, therefore, must be considered a narrative and ideological solution to the unsettled and discontinuous movement of historical time and space.

IV

Given the predominance of pre-1949 Shanghai in commercial as well as academic discourses on the city (nostalgia being its conspicuous logo), on the one hand, and a futurological utopia of the city sanctioned by the technocratic government at the end of the twentieth century on the other, the year of 1959 may seem to be an unlikely entry into the historical-hermeneutic circle of reading Shanghai. Yet the tenth anniversary of the People’s Republic did manage to create a Shanghai image according to its own self-image, which makes explicit a gigantic reframing of historical time. Such a picture is attainable only at a historical rupture; its coming into being marks, more than anything else, the arrival of a new historical Subject understood socially, politically, and culturally. It is only fitting that this picture finds its beholder—in the same way a text finds its author—in Zhang Chunqiao, then already a rising star in the propaganda branch of the Shanghai CCP organizations, who was to surge into national prominence as the de facto leader of the Shanghai Commune (1967) and then of the Cultural-Revolutionary government of Shanghai, and whose political career culminated in—and ended with—his central role in the powerful radical Maoist clique known as the Gang of Four (sirenbang).
Entitled “Climbing New Peaks of Victory” (“Pandeng xinde shengli gaofeng”), Zhang Chunqiao’s article is placed at the very beginning of a collection of essays by prominent writers (Ba Jin), literary critics (Jin Yi), artists (Hu Wanchun, Tong Zhiling, Huang Zongying), and national capitalists (minzu zibenjia, Liu Hongsheng) to celebrate the first decade of post-liberation Shanghai. It starts with an elevated subject-position that is at once trite and striking: “There is a difference between climbing mountains and traveling on the ground. After you mount a high hill, wiping the sweat on your face, greeted by the cool breeze on the top, you can look back and see the path you have just covered. You realize: the journey behind you was a hard one, but what an unthinkable height we have overcome!” Such a dramatic image of modern Subjectivity confronting a sublime Nature could have been inspired by romantic art such as Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog” (1818), only it is, in Zhang Chunqiao, designed to present a political Subject of History facing down a conquered social-material being which is the city of Shanghai itself—a Shanghai image sublimated by its conquest by that new Subject. The “peak” Zhang Chunqiao mounted that day was the former Broadway Building (renamed “Shanghai dasha” or the Grand Building of Shanghai in 1951), a landmark 21-story

Fig. 1. The Broadway Building, renamed the Grand Building of Shanghai after 1949, on the right overlooking the Wellsley or Waibaidu Bridge on the Suzhou River. The new financial district of Pudong looms in the background. Courtesy of Shanghai Municipal Information Office.
building overlooking the Waibaidu Bridge on the Suzhou River. The riot of clouds in the iconic German romantic oil-painting was replaced by an ocean of roofs and spider-web of streets of Shanghai, the biggest and most industrialized city in China. Zhang did not forget to bring a witness to share the spectacle and, more importantly, to provide a framework and a sense of distance in which to better present the picture. And his honored guest was no other than W. E. B. Du Bois, "the well-known black scholar and an eye-witness to many historic events of our times," who, Zhang tells us, had just celebrated his ninetieth birthday in Beijing.

He has been to Shanghai. In 1936, he stayed in a place near the Bund for several days. Now, here we are, twenty-three years later, on the terrace on top of the Grand Building of Shanghai, having a bird’s-eye-view of the city as a whole. He pointed to a green area just over the Waibaidu Bridge and asked me repeatedly: “Is that really the Bund?” Yes, there are no more warships and sailors of Western imperialist countries; there are no more gangsters and prostitutes. That would be easy for most people to imagine. What is less imaginable is that the place has become so clean, so beautiful, so charming. This is why Du Bois could not believe that what he saw was indeed the Bund where he had stayed before. When he
received yet another affirmative answer, he said: “Great change.” It was windy. We asked him to go inside to take some rest. Yet this historian just stood there and refused to move. It looked as if he had entered a giant book depicting earth-shaking, sky-turning events of great historical significance and simply did not want to stop reading. (TY 3)

Zhang does not allow himself merely to be intoxicated with the sight. His task was not only to behold the new but to turn a moment in history into something “above and beyond it,” something that marks a profound rupture of time such that an ontological chasm proves to be constitutive of a configuration of experience sustaining and sustained by a new political unconscious. The proposed new Shanghai image must then set itself up as the true beginning of time; it must outshine and indeed completely engulf the old image of the city as a negated prehistory. If the presence of the new requires the reduction of the past into a rumor, then Zhang does not waste any time to question “exactly how heavy and how big this industrial base of old China was.” Zhang tells his readers with great detail that, according to “reliable statistics,” Shanghai’s total industrial output in 1949 is a mere 390 million yuan, roughly the equivalent of the value produced by Shanghai Light Industry Bureau alone in 1957. He quickly adds that this is not to say that the Chinese people have toiled over the past century only to build such a meager industrial base. Rather, “the wealth we have created, in fact, can be found in New York and London, Tokyo, and Paris, in those splendid palaces of the millionaires.” Such class-based international perspective, to be sure, is not aimed at achieving a self-image of the city to be dissolved into a dubious cosmopolitanism, but prefigures a return of the city to the nation now politicized, consolidated, and understood in terms of class politics. In this light, the following discursive officialdom of the Chinese communists may acquire a strategic forcefulness:

The blood of the Chinese working class can be found in the most beautiful diamond of the imperialist crown. What is left here is nothing more than the prisons and slaughterhouses by which the imperialists exploited the Chinese people; the factories and enterprises in which the Chinese workers were subject to utter slave labor. Only after the Chinese people took their destiny in their own hands did Shanghai become the industrial base and cultural center of the new nation. And only when people realize that they are working for themselves, that their labor is used to create their own happiness has Shanghai started rapidly to change its appearance. (TY 3)

The robust orthodoxy in Zhang Chunqiao’s historico-epistemological imaging, when mediated by a quarter century of post-Mao reform and its own ideological orthodoxy, namely developmentalism, amounts to an
estrangement or defamiliarization. In an odd way it reminds the people of another equally important historical origin of the Shanghai problematic (as it was developed by the radical left-wing intellectuals of modern China) in the colonialist and imperialist framework of capitalist uneven development—the material condition and sociopolitical context for the question of the modern metropolis as such. At the same time, however, Shanghai under such a willful gaze also stands as a mirror-image which separates the newly emerging subject of history from its past as a constructed picture of sheer alienation. It is this transhistorical divide, not the concrete historical and material differentiations, that perpetuates the fracture of time. Yet the Now which emerges from such a nihilist abyss deprives itself of a more concrete history; hence it is not a moment of history but a moment of ahistoricity inscribed in the notion of the eternal, timeless new. Indeed the past’s becoming invisible is the prerequisite of the making of the new Shanghai image as an idea: the idea of politico-economy, class struggle, universal liberation, and above all of a teleology of progress. One can find in the large-scale industrialization after 1949 the tireless work of such a teleology, whose utopian intensity quickly transformed Shanghai from a consumer-oriented, diverse city into workshop of socialist China marked by uniformity.19

Zhang’s article unambiguously lays down the grammar of the new Shanghai narrative, the centrality of which is to contrast the old and the new. Thus we get to read the tedious statistics of industrial output (increased 5.5-fold between 1949 and 1958), steel production (18.5-fold), textile production (2-fold), and the “exciting decline” of Shanghai’s share in industrial output of the country as a whole (from 30% in 1949 to 14.3% in 1958).20 This effort is carried through by other contributors of the volume, from Ba Jin’s rather generic depiction of the new Shanghai as “one big sunny park” in sharp contrast to the evil darkness of the old Shanghai where Chinese residents were routinely harassed by gangsters and humiliated by foreigners; to Liu Hongsheng’s refreshingly simple and frank account of his own conversion from a legendary capitalist entrepreneur to a willing “supporter of the Communist Party.”21

Those discursive devises expose the grammar of “contrasting the old and the new,” which is raised to a metaphysical level by Zhang’s triumphant tone to provide the deeper moral and political justification for the new master narrative. Nonetheless, it was historically a discourse shared by most Chinese intellectuals across the ideological spectrum, a culmination of the discourse of Chinese modernity as Enlightenment, liberation, and the “advancement of forces of production.”22 And it is the same metaphysical assumption that foreshadows the philosophical downfall of such a masculine master narrative which seeks to supercede
its prehistory and class enemy by sweeping them to the “dustbin of history.” It is against this ideological backdrop that a more feminine, more “minor” literature of Shanghai is called forth to account for the stubborn and irreducible residues of the past that coexist with the now as well as the historically new whose abrupt coming into being suddenly changes the constellation the present forms with the past. Along with the search for a more intimate and “down to earth” image of Shanghai there emerges a new dialectic, a new battle of the universal. It is in the wake of the feebleness of the rhetoric of either “the beginning of History” (Zhang) or “the end of History” (Francis Fukuyama) that conflicting and intertwining modes of representation flourish and new orders of signs begin to emerge.

V

Detached from the small-circle rivalry between the Beijing-based and Shanghai-based men of letters, and shunning away from a holistic picture of Shanghai in developed narrative form (as attempted by Mao Dun), Lu Xun nonetheless remained a sharp observer of Shanghai in its most quotidian complexity and melodramatic excess. His essayistic sketches of the nitty-gritty of a twisted yet thriving everyday world, more than any sweeping intellectual summary, prefigure a Shanghai emerging in a minor literature.

In his 1935 short piece “The Young Ladies of Shanghai” (“Shanghai shaonü”), Lu Xun paints an intimate portrait of the young ladies of Shanghai that should claim its place in the gallery of urban literature next to those Parisian street walkers and domestic maids in Baudelaire and Proust. The essay starts with a sociological observation of the snobbish dress codes of Shanghai, a matter of life and death for the socially mobile and financially precarious Shanghai middle class. Quickly it moves on to the shopping rituals and taboos practiced to perfection—and held as the vital secret of the city—by those young, fashionable women of Shanghai looking for cheap bargains. “Usually the shop clerks are patient if you have a hard time making up your mind while picking and choosing, but not if you drag on for too long. There is only one way to save the situation: you have to be a little flirty and capable of swallowing some teasing. Otherwise, the regular contemptuous glimpse will quickly come your way.” Lu Xun then continues his observation:

The women accustomed to Shanghai living have long been aware of their glamour, as well as of the danger that comes with it. The air those fashionable
ladies put on is certainly boastful, but it is also a way to defend, to muster, and to resist, as if they are at once the darling and the enemy of everybody in the opposite sex; as if they are pleased and annoyed at the same time. This air also has those under-aged teenage girls infected, as we see them shop in the stores with their head tilted to the side, pretending to be slightly unhappy, as if they are facing a ferocious enemy. The shop clerks, of course, poke fun at them just as they do to the grown-up women. But these young ladies already understand what that means. In short, they have prematurely matured. 23

It is in this prematurely matured image of the young women in Shanghai that a critical poetic image of the city is formed in the irreducible entanglement and ruthless overdetermination of an urban sociology, psychology, and economics. Relating the image of the Russian young girls in Fyodor Sologub who have the body of a child but the eyes that are fully mature, Lu Xun observes that the young ladies of Shanghai are constantly placed in dangerous situations of the modern big city. Indeed, the paradoxical beauty of these young women becomes the aesthetic space in which the harsh sociological truth of the city is restored with its phenomenological richness and sensuous cruelty.

This relatively obscure two-page piece by Lu Xun may be regarded as the marker for a hidden origin of a minor literature about Shanghai. Such a minor literary tradition, which is also a feminine discourse, is intertwined with the subaltern realms and forms that underlie and form a sharp contrast to the phantasmagoria and mythology of Shanghai modern. More often then not, it has as its subject matter the hardships of everyday life, the endurance and the cleverness of diverse human groups coexisting in cramped social space, the fleeting happiness and sorrow in the domestic interior, the language, above all the gossips, and, most notably, the women.

In Wang Anyi’s literary production in the 1990s, the image of Shanghai via that of women has achieved its narrative elaboration and symbolic differentiation. In the 1995 novel I Love Bill (Wo ai bi’er), Wang Anyi tells a story about the romantic yet strenuously calculated love affairs between the female protagonist, Ah San, an art school dropout, and a series of foreigners in Shanghai in the 1980s. Dwelling in her own imagination and her longing for an idealized life that seems possible only with Westerners, Ah San, after a brief romance with an American diplomat, starts making contacts with foreigners in public spaces until she is arrested at a luxury hotel lobby as a prostitute. Denying the charges, she tells the investigator that she does not have sex with foreigners for money, an explanation which earns her no more than a nickname, “do-it-for-nothing” (baizuo) among other female inmates. Depicting her dubious mode of existence, Wang Anyi writes:
Now Ah San had been classified to those who prepared themselves only for foreigners, and Chinese boys had given up on her. This was why she did not even have a Chinese admirer. They lived inside a mysterious circle, inaccessible by strangers. Nobody knew anything about how they lived day in and day out. The truth is: sometimes they stayed in the most luxurious hotels, eating oysters that had just been flown in; sometimes they lived in a transient house in the outer suburb, having instant noodles and using candle lights during power outages. Their outfits were hanging on the brick walls painted with lime, covered with a gauze kerchief. Their fashionable shoes were just scattered on the cement floor, one here, one there.

While the fragmented, precarious life lived by Ah San pulls together in its immediate incoherence a coherent image of the city, she is also watched by an urban gaze that readily reminds one of the shop clerks’ stare in Lu Xun, under which the young ladies of Shanghai quickly reach their maturity. As Ah San, all dressed up, trying to make a decision at the tourist store across the street from a luxury hotel, her hesitation looks like a required moment in a pre-programmed game: “One of her hollowed out shoes with a thin heel and an elegant strip extended over to the curb of the street, like a person about to wade feeling the speed and temperature of the flowing water. From behind, her body looked like a frozen moment in a dance scene. Suddenly, her body leaped forward, and she stepped down the sidewalk and quickly crossed the street toward the hotel. A smile appeared on the face of the female shopkeeper, as if things happened just as she had expected” (83). Yet for Ah San, the luxury hotel is not just another building in the urban space, but rather something of existential, indeed utopian, significance: “She liked this place. Although separated from the outside only by a glass wall, it constituted a completely different world. She felt that this architecture was a glass dome of fate, and everyone wrapped underneath it had a covert relationship to one another, a relationship that would become clear when the right moment came” (86). The “covert relationship” to be realized under that glass dome of fate, to be sure, is also the way by which Shanghai’s collective imagination relates itself to an imagined, idealized modernity. This is the reason why each time Ah San tries to escape from her imperfect reality, embodied by her dusty room piled with garbage and plastic bags, she finds herself in the lobby of a luxury hotel. The “frequently established and frequently vanished intimacies with those foreigners eroded her confidence, making her forgetful about what exactly she was looking for,” but “the more obscure those things were, the more hope they gave you” (106). It is just like the alien languages with which she communicates with her lovers/customers but never masters, whose “pronunciation and grammar, always a step
ahead of her and demanding her extra attention, were the materials for her dreams: they made her dreams concrete” (98). Perhaps there is nothing better than Ah San’s indulgence with the “Hellenic facial profiles” and linguistic peculiarities of her own phantasm in making vivid the Shanghai dwellers’ sense- and detail-obsessed, even calculating romance with something that is so fundamentally abstract and idealistic. In a rare moment, Ah San and Martin, a French art-dealer, embrace each other passionately because they get to spend the night together. Wang Anyi quickly interrupts with the unsentimental remarks: “But the reasons for their affection were different. Martin held in his arms a moment, whereas Ah San held in her arms her entire life” (73). The intensity of Shanghai’s love-affair with its own modern image can also be understood in the ways in which it tries to seize/cease a fleeting moment in universal history to turn it into something timeless and dependable. For the nostalgic Shanghai, what is held by the history of world capitalism as a moment in its global adventure is embraced as the city’s entire life—its past glory, its present anxiety, as well as its future meant as the recapitulation of its Golden Age.

The perseverance with which the lower-middle-class Shanghai dwellers build and live their minute everyday life into a concrete abstraction is a recurring theme in Wang Anyi’s recent work, in which that model of bourgeois life—as the pattern, the original copy, the Idea—becomes paradoxical retrospectively. In an essay in memory of a Shanghai that never was, she describes her unexpected encounter in the middle of the Cultural Revolution with Shanghai bourgeois interiority in an old apartment building, where the parents of her fellow sent-down student lived. “I was stunned to see such a scene . . . [the bourgeois life] was so well-preserved; there was not a single scratch on the surface of it! Time and change had no effect on it!” the writer exclaims. She goes on to tell her readers that the living room could have been placed in any decade—the 30s, 40s, even the 50s and 60s—and yet it was placed during the 70s, the stormy moment of historical upheavals caused by Mao’s Cultural Revolution. In a nominally communist, classless society, class, as both political concept and a culture, as it is embodied by the Shanghai bourgeoisie, is perceived to be holding on to its wounded yet actually existing social prestige and distinction. Even at the end of its rope, the bourgeois effectively fights back from the ground zero of everyday life against the newly endowed yet largely symbolic status of the working class. “They still lived their lives as if nothing had happened,” the author exclaimed, “they just quietly passed yet another narrow gate of history. They could be considered to be backward and out of joint with our times, but they looked completely self-sufficient; without depending on the times, they lived on from one generation to the next” (161–62).
The silent, ghostly movement of the Shanghai bourgeoisie in the passage of time is certainly one of the memorable images in Wang Anyi’s writings during the 1990s. Her elegy for this class, which is at once sincere and ironical, can be understood equally well in that class’s living and dying at the same time. Proving itself “above and beyond” even the Maoist attack, the Shanghai bourgeois seems to die a weird death, that is, in its revival and triumph. The residual, actually existing bourgeois culture, not as a concept or image but in material concreteness, is deterritorialized—deferred, multiplied, ritualized, disseminated, universalized, and hollowed out—as it is copied and consumed by the middle-class urbanites as both the ghost and the guarding angel of a decayed city. And this is the concrete in which the Shanghai bourgeois reaches its after life: by becoming a “body without organs,” an urban legend, a mythological machine. In the 1990s, when Mao’s China has been all but buried by the new round of commodification and “globalization,” it is the working class, as both a political concept and a culture—as it is engrained in the Shanghai concrete, irreducibly local and national everyday life despite its superficial glamour as a “global city”—that finds its place switched with the Shanghai bourgeoisie during the Cultural Revolution. Whereas the bourgeois Shanghai embraces its future, sometimes through a willful nostalgia for its anchor in a more classical moment in the imagined universal history of the bourgeois civilization (colonialism or semi-colonialism, for instance), the working class has retreated to the everydayness of a postsocialist world bearing the imprint of a suppressed history and its memory.

In what has become a self-conscious production of a literary saga of the city and women, Wang Anyi continues her representation of Shanghai as a labyrinth of change and non-change, melancholy and ideal, sobriety and myth. In her 1999 novel, Meitou (Sister), the heroine, a “tough darling” (“shuaishuai dada de baobei”) of the lower middle-class residents of the Shanghai longtang, becomes a memorable image of the city which passionately, persistently builds its quotidian concreteness according to the obscure model of the bourgeoisie. After a detailed account the furniture and the interior arrangement of the “big room” of Meitou’s parents’ apartment, which is living room, dining room, and bedroom all at once, Wang Anyi writes:

[The decorations] bore a splendor on top of a classical prudence. Even the two beds in the room did not look vulgar and improperly familiar as privacy exposed; on the contrary, they endowed the room with a warm and practical atmosphere of everyday living. They also reduced the frivolous touch of the room to a certain degree—after all it was overstuffed and looked excessive. Yet, since everything was solid and substantial, they reflected a simple, even naive
heart: All it wanted was to paint its own life according to the middle-class model, following the principle of diligence and hard work.26

The study of the social custom of the Shanghai lower middle class brings Wang Anyi to a close-ranged depiction of the material space of its everyday sphere with astonishing detail and precision. In her 1991 essay, “The Western-Style Houses of Shanghai” (“Shanghai de yangfang”), she presents a portrait of Shanghai everyday life under socialism as a charnel house of allegorical images of overlapping historical, political, and social paradigms:

Today, life in the Western-style houses in Shanghai has become suspicious. The hot water hoses installed on the bathtub and the washing basin are rusting away after years of being completely idle. The hot water for a bath has to be carried in a kettle and poured into the bathtub, which means that it can barely cover the surface of its enormous bottom. In those houses the kitchen is usually on the first floor, thus carrying a kettle of hot water upstairs always amounts to an adventure. The fireplaces in the rooms are now sheer decoration and reduce the useful square footages, too. The pretty picture of a pensive face next to the fire has long retreated into the remote, distant past.27

With a relentless sociological interest in the detail, Wang Anyi tells us that such houses were originally designed for a single family, but now each of them is shared by several, sometimes many.28 Indeed, the multiplication or multiplicity of Shanghai residences contained or confined in the same space not only suggests the impossibility of a properly bourgeois way of life, but further implies the inevitable arrival of the postsocialist consumer masses in the not-so-distant future. Put differently, when the proletarian cause of Mao’s China is replaced by the state-sanctioned social-libidinal fervor for the bourgeois or the protobourgeois during Deng’s China, the proletarian sneaks back with a vengeance at the allegorical and the “cultural” heart of the modernization ideology: it thoroughly and radically turns on its head the properly—namely, individualistic, private, self-interest but with some measure of cultural vanity or pretense—bourgeois self-image of modernization and yields the floor of historical happening to the masses of postsocialist China. All this, to be sure, is only hinted here, and the hint can be read probably only in a historical hindsight available to those who witness the explosive development of Shanghai in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century.

The aging face of the city, on which an urban legend selflessly and even happily thrives and multiplies, is mingled with its literary counterpart which is the aging woman, the former Miss Shanghai, in Anyi’s Changhenge (Ballad of Eternal Sorrow). What links the two things to each
other is an abstract machine of faciality, a prosopopeia which posits a face and a voice to the deceased, absent or dead and a meaning where there really is no meaning at all. Prosopopeia, as it is discussed in Deleuze, is a trope of giving shape and meaning to an otherwise shapeless and incomprehensible world; it is a figure marked and haunted by its own figurality which, in reality, only vaguely disguises the dark world of nothingness behind language as such (TP 188). As de Man puts it, a prosopopeia is “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech.”29 Does the decaying body of Shanghai carry a message behind its faciality? Does the voice that comes out of the open mouth mean anything? The pervasive melancholy registered in Wang Anyi’s most important novel must be understood in terms of this struggle against the nothingness of meaning—or simply the horror of facing this nothingness—behind the death mask of history.30

This is the urban background against which Wang Anyi’s series portrait of Shanghai women becomes clear. In virtually all her female heroines, there is something in common, which Wang Anyi herself considers to be anything but the stereotypical Shanghai femininity.
Fig. 4. The Jinmao Building in Pudong, an office building which also houses the Hyatt Hotel. Courtesy of Shanghai Municipal Information Office.
Rather, she tells us that it is decidedly antiromantic but entangled with the brutal material and social conditions of Shanghai everyday life:

That there are some plane trees in the city does not mean that Shanghai is a romantic city. Everything here is tough inside, built up brick by brick. If you sniff the air hard enough, you sense the flavor of asphalt and the salty, pluckery ocean in the wind as it caresses your face gently. If you climb on the top of a building and look around, you have an eyeful of the city’s utter coarseness—the tightly packed cement boxes, like bee hives or ant hills, looking rather hideous and horrifying. Do not be nostalgic for the old dreams of the 1920s and 30s, as they were only the lights in the front stage, rendering invisible the tightly packed bee hives and ant hills which conceal inside themselves a vengeful determination and an impatient readiness.31

Wang Anyi never fails to see the inverted image of the city in that of the Shanghai women. In such an allegorical identification and signification, discontinuous time and space finds a narrative and a language. In her essay “In Search of Su Qing,” written in 1995, the same year she published Changhenge (Ballad of Eternal Sorrow), Wang Anyi captures, in the image of this female popular fiction writer in the 1940s the spatiotemporal construct of Shanghai as a “legend” deconstructed:

How many people’s experiences and stories have been lost in this city! Even though everything belongs to the category of gossip and seems unworthy of a place in the history book, nonetheless, in their absence many things about Shanghai become inexplicable and, therefore, legendary. This is what people mean when they say that the history of Shanghai is a legend. In fact, every single day of this city is spent carefully on the nitty-gritty of everyday life without any inappropriate fantasies; yet once you look back all of a sudden, it has already turned into legend. . . . Elsewhere history seems to move on in an orderly fashion, but in Shanghai, history moves in a hop, step and jump, and one has to grasp the most concrete life has to offer in order not to live in a dream.32

The toughness and practicality of Shanghai women contrast with the standard image of male Shanghai middle class—the men of letters as both a caricature and a culmination of its literary self-image—which 1940s writers like Shi Tuo repeatedly referred to as “petty-bourgeois fantastic day-dreamers” (xiaozichanjieji kongxiangjia) in his “Notes from Shanghai” (“Shanghai shouzha”).33 What is perceived, with amiable self-contempt, by the male modernist Shi Zhecun as the “sentimentalism of Shanghai” is seen by Wang Anyi as, rather, the quotidian concreteness mustered and collected meticulously by the middle-class Shanghai urbanites as a source for “secret” or “stolen” (tou) enjoyment. This is the subject-matter as well as the truth-content of a minor literary tradition by
which Wang Anyi attempts at a socio-cultural genealogy of Shanghai as a modern metropolis. While the adjective implies illegitimacy vis-à-vis history as it is depicted by major literature and ideological discourses, it also indicates a persistence, endurance, and survival that sustains the city. As she remarks:

[The Shanghai everyday life] scrapes all the little pleasures from every corner for its patient, slow enjoyment. The stormy changes of the outside world are abstract and alien to it, as it only acknowledges what can be experienced intimately and sensuously. You can call that a secret enjoyment, but it proves to be full of life, strong and stubborn, and would rather die than give up. This is not a life in which heroes are nourished, rather, it is meant for the faceless crowd which constitutes the pedestal on which the heroic statue stands. Such a life is neither poetic nor tragic; its representation does not make grand literature, but only fills the marginal space of the newspaper supplements; indeed, even its language is made of leftovers, scraps, crumbs. (IS 44–45)

In this literature of “leftovers, scraps, crumbs,” the image of Su Qing crystallizes that of the Shanghai women, which in turn makes visible—and durable—the city they inhabit. What is important about this cycle of literary allegorization, however, is the final appearance of the constant and structural that underlies the frivolous surface of Shanghai urban culture:

All people could see was how modern and graceful the Shanghai women were, because their fashion came from Europe and America, especially from Paris. Nobody seemed to know how bold, vigorous, and pungent [pola] they can get. In Su Qing, such pungency becomes convincing. They were sharp-tongued and eloquent, often getting the upper hand while dealing with men. They knew everything and nothing tricky could ever fool them. They were tough, sharp, but never annoying, which indicated a deep-seated smoothness and an intimate knowledge of the way things were, which was something only experience could nourish. Superficially, they were carefree and adventurous, but in their mind they were always measuring and calculating, knowing only too well that a small imprudence could spoil a big plot. This is living in its most meticulous, with the knowledge that, as the world appeared to have no set rules, deep inside, there were giant, unbendable, iron-clad laws and principles governing it. This world may show you some good humor, but you should know better never to push your luck. Therefore the Shanghai women did not make good revolutionaries, as none of them had the ambition for subversion. (IS 47–48)

Through the concreteness of everyday images of Shanghai, above all the Shanghai women, Wang Anyi patiently approaches a biopolitics at work which fills the gaps, omissions, and void of forgetting of the modern metropolis. Between the feminine wisdom and its inexhaustible vigor,
cunning, and persistence and the “giant, unbendable, iron-clad laws and principles,” a new dialectic and a new language of the urban/modern is taking shape.

VI

A tacit, often unspoken assumption of various discourses on Shanghai lies in the city’s intertwining and blurring of what is considered Chinese (but not modern) with what is modern (but not Chinese). This assumption underlies the fascination with or distaste for a culture of Shanghai generated in the national and global contexts throughout modern Chinese history. Among them, the radical, metaphysical image-making exemplified by Zhang Chunqiao marks the lone attempt to go beyond this binary opposite, but only by collapsing a Chinese problematic into the absolutized discourse and teleology of the universal. Various counterdiscourses, especially those which emerged in the 1990s, seek an ideological reversal of a metahistorical narrative, but only by identifying with and universalizing a repressed and underdeveloped Chinese bourgeois culture, which was cut short, then erased by the previous paradigms of Enlightenment, revolution, nation-state, the masses, and socialism. But Shanghai can do better by showing that it is neither a reified, reduced, and twisted version of the modern or of the Chinese, nor a muddy, undifferentiated mix of the two. Rather, the existence of Shanghai urban culture lies in a deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which follows a different route of flight and forms a different plane of consistency. That is to say, the modernity and Chineseness of Shanghai can be understood only as something more modern than the modern and more Chinese than the Chinese. To do that, however, Shanghai has to find a way to become smaller, meaner, more “down to earth,” less formed, less significative, less territorialized than the images imposed or self-imposed upon it, images that themselves have formed a “community of medium” shaped and reshaped by generations. The unmaking of Shanghai as its own myth prepares for its participation in a larger and more vital context.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari give a long quote from Henry Miller about something that does and does not have to with China. He may as well be talking about Shanghai, or modernity as such, and in a way reminiscent of Wang Anyi:

China is the weed in the human cabbage patch. . . . The weed is the Nemesis of human endeavor. . . . Of all the imaginary existences we attribute to plant, beast and star the weed leads the most satisfactory life of all. True, the weed produces
no lilies, no battleships, no Sermons on the Mount. . . . Eventually the weed gets the upper hand. Eventually things fall back into a state of China. This condition is usually referred to by historians as the Dark Age. Grass is the only way out. . . . The weed exists only to fill the waste spaces left by cultivated areas. It grows between, among other things. The lily is beautiful, the cabbage is provender, the poppy is maddening—but the weed is rank growth . . . it points a moral. (TP 18–19)

Not to be fooled or outdone, Deleuze and Guattari quickly ask, “Which China is Miller talking about? The old China, the new, an imaginary one, or yet another located on a shifting map?” These are, of course, great questions. However, I want to turn to a different topic to finish with: language, writing, and literature.

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari define the notion of “minor literature” as follows: (1) its language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization, for example, written by a minority within a major language, such as the Prague Jew Kafka writing in German; (2) everything in it is political; and (3) everything in it takes on a collective value.34 Our questions, rather, are: What is the language in which Shanghai is written? Is it written by a minority (Shanghainese) within a major language (Chinese)? Or, rather, is the major language, in the specific time-space of Shanghai modern, something other than Chinese which, after all, is no longer the *lingua franca* of the universal? When Meitou interrupts her husband’s philosophical babbling in Mandarin, is she disturbed by the dialect that is not her own, or by what the dialect conveys that is alien and even threatening to her well-being in daily life? Is Ah San’s attraction to the foreign languages a sign of her disand misplaced cultural and political identity or merely the fascination of a provincial girl with the speech of the cosmopolitan? If the writing machine of the Shanghai discourse comes from a minority position, what is the politics and collective value of this minority construct? What is that whole other story that is vibrating within it that contrasts this minor literature to major literature, namely the literature of the properly individual, the Oedipal, the bourgeois? Or, is this minor literature in fact a major literature, or wants to become one in its dreams and fantasies?

Thus, Wang Anyi’s writings of Shanghai everyday life from a feminine—but not feminist—viewpoint uncover a theoretical and political entanglement or contradiction that is historical in nature: instead of asking what her writings can do for women’s literature, we should ask what women’s literature can do for a radical rethinking of the gigantic frameworks of history embedded and engrained in the irreducibly material(ist) and “minor” texture of everyday life. It is this materialist grasp of everyday life in both its concrete detail and holistic irony that
allows Wang Anyi’s writings to transcend academic confines of feminism and ideological criticism as we know them in the Western context. Such a transcendence, moreover, shows its route of flight or “deterritorialization” through the traditional terrain of realism henceforth endowed with new vitality, rigor, and dynamism.

It is realism as a revitalized force of representation and cognitive mapping that makes explicit a critical refiguration of the dialectic of “major” and “minor” literatures as it unfolds in Wang Anyi’s writing of Shanghai. The relevance of the concept of minor literature to a critical reconsideration of modern Chinese literature may be highlighted by Fredric Jameson’s controversial notion of national allegory, by his assertion that all third-world literatures are necessarily collective stories about a life-and-death struggle in the political situation. In this light, the May Fourth literary-cultural tradition, including its extension into PRC literary production, can only be considered a textbook example of minor literature. The literary discourse of Shanghai, however, emerges as a minarian constructs and the politically motivated aesthetics within an international minority which exists as a national majority—the New Literature and the discursive modernity of the left-wing Chinese intellectuals. It also, by its deterritorialization, shows its escape from the nation and reunion with the universal, the properly “major” or bourgeois individualistic tradition against which the progressive literary mainstream of modern China defines itself as a “minor” tradition. Wang Anyi’s writings can then be understood as a radical turning of the table on the stable and ideologically entrenched binary hierarchy between “major” and “minor” literatures. That is, her narrative must be viewed as a stunning appropriation of the bourgeois literary and aesthetic arsenal for the self-assertion of a collective literary enterprise. To this extent, her writings bear a meaningful testimony to the legitimacy—to avoid the term “historical necessity”—of Chinese socialism not only as a social project, but also as a culture and a form of life. The brutal interpenetration of history, culture, class-consciousness, and political identity in this context indicates the coexistence, overlapping, even symbiosis between different discourses, paradigms, and symbolic orders in modern China. It also shows the ruthless movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, by which different ideological systems seek its own life and afterlife at others’ expenses. Amidst all this, the story of Shanghai becomes a problem for all of us. Thence Deleuze’s questions and his rhetorical answer: “How to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an
immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its crib, walk the tightrope” (19).

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NOTES

5 Zhou Leshan, “Shanghai de chuntian” (The Spring of Shanghai), originally published in Liangyou magazine, no. 56, 1935; also included in Shanghai: jiyi yu xiangxiang, ed. Ma Fengyang (Shanghai, 1996), pp. 71–78; hereafter cited in text. All translations in this essay are my own.
7 Zhang Ailing, “Daodi shi Shanghairen” (They Are Shanghaiese After All), originally published in Zazhi monthly, vol. 11, no. 5, August 1943; also included in Shanghai: jiyi yu xiangxiang, pp. 82–84.
8 Thomas Bender, when comparing New York and Parisian urban modernities, argues that New York was modern in sociological terms long before Paris, and that the latter’s urge to “order and conceptualize the modern as a whole” was conditioned not by its being thoroughly modern, but by its co-existence with an entrenched and culturally significant traditional order. This observation is certainly relevant to a Shanghai–Paris or Shanghai–New York comparison. See Thomas Bender, “The Modern City as Text and Context: The Public Culture of New York” in The City as Text, ed. Angela Vistarchi, Rivista di Studi Anglo-Americani, 6 (1990), 15–54.
13 Fu Sinian, “Zhi Xinchao she” (To New Wave Society), in Xinchao (New Wave), 2, no. 4, Jan. 19, 1920, in Shanghai: jiyi yu xiangxiang, p. 184.
14 Zhou Zuoren, “Shanghai qi” (The Shanghai habit), in Tanlong ji (Speaking of dragons), (Shanghai, 1927), pp. 157–60.
15 For Chen, Qian, and Liang, see Xiong Yuezhi, “Haipai sanhun” (“Random Notes on the Shanghai School”), in Shanghai: jiyi yu xiangxiang, p. 184; hereafter cited in text as HS.
17 Zhang Chunqiao, “Pandeng xinde shengli gaofeng,” in Shanghai jiefang shizhounian (Ten years after the liberation of Shanghai) (Shanghai, 1960), p. 1; hereafter cited in text as TY.

18 The Broadway Building was completed in 1934 and is regarded as an early example of the International Style in Shanghai. One of the three tallest buildings on the Bund, it remained until the early 1980s a major luxury hotel in Shanghai. Before the Oriental Pearl (Television Broadcast) Tower was built in the 1990s, the building’s spacious terrace on the eighteenth story was a privileged elevation point where an aerial view of the Bund and the entire downtown Shanghai was available and regularly presented to visiting foreign and domestic dignitaries. Zhou Shoujuan, the flagship writer of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School of popular fiction was so pleased to be put there when attending Lu Xun’s reburial ceremony in 1956 that he wrote an article admiring the building. Since the 1970s, however, the increasingly unbearable stench of the Suzhou River, caused by unregulated industrial pollution, has posed a major threat to the attraction of the building. See Yang Jiayou, Shanghai laofangzi de gushi (Shanghai: The Stories of Classic Houses) (Shanghai, 1996), pp. 79–81.

19 This is evidenced by the change of Shanghai’s economic structure between 1952 and 1978. In this period, the industrial sector’s share of Shanghai’s GNP rose from 52.4% in 1952 to 77.4% in 1978; whereas the share of the service sector fell dramatically from 41.7% to 18.6%. See Gao Ruxi and Yu Yihong, “Shanghai jingji: tingzhi yu zai qifei, 1953–1993” (“Shanghai economy: stagnation and the second take-off, 1953–1993”), in Wang Hui and Yu Guoliang ed., Shanghai: Chengshi, shehui, yu wenhua (Shanghai: city, society, and culture) (Hong Kong, 1998), p. 79.

20 In 1999, Shanghai’s share in China’s GDP was 4.9%, placing it the eighth among thirty-two provincial and province-equivalent municipal economies. From 1958’s seventeen billion yuan, Shanghai’s total industrial output reached 125 billion yuan in 1990, averaging a 8.2% annual growth rate. From there it skyrocketed to 620 billion in 1999, registering a whopping 14% annual growth rate. See the Shanghai Economy Year Book 2000 (Shanghai, 2000), pp. 66–67. It is noteworthy that during the period 1970–1990, namely the first decade of post-Mao economic reform, Shanghai’s economy grew at an average 7.5 percent, which is below the national average, indicating Shanghai’s function as a conservative “rear guard for the socialist economic reform” during that period. See Gao Ruxi and Yu Yihong, “Shanghai jingji: tingzhi yu zai qifei, 1953–1993,” pp. 74, 82.


22 In the autumn of 2000, when a wistful Xie Jin, a loyal Shanghainese and the foremost filmmaker of the PRC before the Fifth Generation took the world by storm, looked back at his own long, complicated career, he told his audience in America that the Cultural Revolution divided his corpus into two parts, and every film in the first part was obsessed with one theme and one theme only: the contrast between the old and the new (xinjiu duibi). Xie’s remarks were made at a conference on Chinese cinema, organized by Haili Kong, Swarthmore College, October 7, 2000.

23 Lu Xun, “Shanghai de shaonü,” in Lu Xun quanji (Collected Works of Lu Xun), vol. 4, 563-64; originally published in Shenbao yuenshu (Shenbao monthly), vol. 2, no. 9, September 15, 1933.


28 A lengthier quote from the text may be needed here: “the back of the main door is now fully occupied by mailboxes, milk-bottle holders, and electric bells, with labels on each of them saying the Zhao’s, the Li’s, the Wang’s, and Zhang’s, the Sun’s, and maybe the Gu’s and the Liu’s as well. . . . As each floor is perched with a different family, there are three or four stoves in the kitchen, each with a light bulb hanging above it. As there are also several water hoses over the sink, the plumbing and the wiring form a spider web by themselves. The bathroom is, of course, shared. During the summer season there is always a constant flow of people in and out till late night, with sewage water coming out of the tube on the other end of the house, running on and on like the background music of the quite night. . . . As people multiply, not every household is guaranteed a spot in the kitchen, thus the hallways and balconies are all turned into kitchens. In the evening, people come home from work. As adults start cooking and kids play around, there is an atmosphere of communal life. All those houses look decayed because of a lack of renovation. Outside, the stucco surface on the walls is crumbling, exposing the bricks underneath; inside the house, all the hardwood floors have loosened up, with rats running in-between the floor and the ceilings below which invariably show water marks as evidence of leakage. The Western-style residential houses in Shanghai have only their names left. Their interiority can no longer afford a close check.”
32 Wang Anyi, “Xunzhao Su Qing” (“In Search of Su Qing”), in Chongjian xiangyata (Rebuilding the Ivory Tower) (Shanghai, 1997), p. 45; hereafter cited in text as IS.
33 Shi Tuo, “Shanghai shouzha” (“Notes from Shanghai”) in Shi Tuo sanwen xuan (Selected essays of Shi Tuo), ed. Fan Peisong (Tianjin, 1992), p. 223.
34 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (Minneapolis, 1986); hereafter cited in text.