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Prologue: The City at a Standstill

In Zhang Ailing’s now classic 1943 short story “Sealed Off” (“Feng suo”), Shanghai, the epitome of Chinese urban modernity, comes to a standstill. At the beginning of the story, as the kaleidoscopic images of the city converge on a moving tram car—the entry to the urban space in both fiction and reality—the bustling, sleepless commercial center of the Far East seems assured of its eternal motion and energy, of a rationality and temporal order that underscore the passion and chaos of a modern metropolis. The rhythm of modern Shanghai seems a certainty, its course as predetermined as the iron tram tracks blazing in the sun, stretching endlessly onward. “If there hadn’t been an air raid, if the city hadn’t been sealed, the tram car would have gone on forever,” the narrator tells us. Toward the end of the story, however, one wonders if the city existed at all, if the modern, with all its material monumentality and mundane concreteness, is nothing more than a
fleeting sentimentality, a sham. What has happened in between, in the short period of time captured by Zhang in a few pages?

As the siren goes off, the stream of life is halted and frozen into a frame; the expansive space of urban interactions is now crammed into a tram car; the movement, fluidity, and restlessness that characterize the city yield to immobility and fragmentation; the openness of the urban space is replaced by the city as a fortress; and the internal fractions—in economic, social, and class terms—of the city are amplified by its inhabitants’ instinct for self-preservation. The surreal(ist) transition from restless energy to eerie quiet follows the impersonal image of the big city at the beginning of the story:

Gradually, the street also grew quiet: not that it was a complete silence, but the sound of voices eased into a confused blur, like the soft rustle of a straw-stuffed pillow, heard in a dream. The huge, shambling city sat dozing in the sun, its head resting heavily on people’s shoulders, its spittle slowly dripping down their shirts, an inconceivably enormous weight pressing down on everyone. Never before, it seemed, had Shanghai been this quiet—and in the middle of the day! A beggar, taking advantage of the breathless, birdless quiet, lifted up his voice and began to chant: “Good master, good lady, kind sir, kind ma’am, won’t you give alms to this poor man? Good master, good lady…” But after a short while he stopped, scared silent by the eerie quiet.¹

If one does not believe that the elaborate organism of the modern metropolis can be paralyzed by a single incident, not even one of the magnitude of the Pacific War, then the air raid that momentarily shuts down the city might look more like a fire drill staged by a sharp-eyed, mischievous writer for the purpose of filling another page of her literary sketchbook. Yet in Zhang, a moment of interruption grows rapidly into a shock as the reader, along with her characters, is pressed to face a temporal abyss, indeed a different dimension of temporality, in which the empirical and ideological order by which we organize our sense of the world suddenly becomes precarious and quickly collapses into a frozen surrealist landscape. In a city at standstill, modernity finds its vivid allegory in the dispersal of urban middle-class reality into a daydream, as the hypocritical male facade of the city crumbles before a woman’s blush. Yet there is everything but sentimentality in Zhang’s
writings about Shanghai. Once the air raid alarm is lifted, the city goes back to business as usual. After an imagined romance runs its course, the protagonist, Lü Zongzhen, goes back to his seat. Thinking about the phone call that she knows will never come, the young lady (and the reader) realizes that what happens during the sealed-off hours does not really happen at all. Shanghai simply dozed for a moment; it had an unreasonable dream, a self-dissolving fantasy.

By 1942, Shanghai, after the previous decades of explosive demographic and economic expansion, had already risen to the status of undisputed center of trade, finance, production, consumption, and entertainment in China and the leading metropolis in the Far East. Its fashion and tempo of life closely followed that of London, Paris, and New York; its daily life was linked more closely to the West than to the rest of the country to which it geographically, that is to say, accidentally, belonged. Compared with Shanghai’s cosmopolitan glamour and decadent excess, Tokyo was provincial, and Hong Kong was still a sleepy fishermen’s village. While Chinese realist writers during the 1930s and 1940s (most notably Mao Dun) tried, with varying degrees of success, to capture the sociological totality, the politicoeconomic and class logic of this monstrous urban complex, impressionist writers (such as Mu Shiying, Liu Na’ou, and Shi Zhecun) wrestled with the sensuous light and sound of the cityscape and the psychological-aesthetic drama or trauma it produced. Both groups were inevitably drawn into the city at work. Intent on providing a panoramic picture of the metropolis, they encountered the city in its most alert and industrious mode. Unlike those realist or impressionist writers, who were all immigrant men, Zhang Ailing, a twenty-two-year-old Shanghai native, seems determined to seize the city when it is off guard, off work, absentminded, and dreamy—when it is pinned down and rendered helpless by some external, arbitrary accident such as war. In other words, for Zhang’s narrative enterprise, modernity is representable only as its own dreamworld, when it is stripped from the familiar mechanical-temporal order and exiled into the wilderness of allegory.

To capture the city while it is dozing is to sneak into its unconscious and watch its dream. Zhang wastes no time in adjusting her focus onto the empty interiority of a now petrified city, the enclosed space inside the tram car where strangers, face-to-face at close range, are determined to
ignore each other, struggling to be distracted from the maddening duration of an empty time devoid of the action of the normal world. The tram car, a quintessential symbol of urban, industrial modernity, is changed from a machine for entering the city into an apparatus for observing the temporal-psychological structure of the modern metropolis. The result is more than a snapshot offering a Simmelian picture of the city. As the passengers, from all walks of Shanghai urban life—businessmen, stockbrokers, bank accountants, medical students, teachers, housewives, and shoppers—are literally trapped in the unsettling, ruinous boredom, they scramble to fill the void of their trained experience (Erfahrung) in order to ward off the damaging, traumatic moments (Erlebnis) of silence and the city’s stasis. They read everything, anything, from the classified section of the newspaper to business cards, street signs, and receipts dug out of pockets, just to keep themselves from drowning in ennui, from falling into a strange temporality, an inverted world of the antimaterial.

Zhang’s urban literary photography, employing negative print, has its grammatological counterpart in the story. Lü Zongzhen has nothing better to do inside the stopped tram car than scrutinize the steamed spinach buns wrapped inside the newspaper. When he pulls back the paper, the newspaper has left its ink imprinted on the buns, “with all the characters in reverse.” Thus utilitarian announcements “indispensable” to modern urban life turn into “a joke,”\(^3\) into an uneasy reminder that the familiar order can be turned upside down and inside out; that reality retains a shadowy, ghostly double; that a slight disruption in the symbolic chain can knock seemingly secure subject-positions off balance, revealing their precariousness and even ridiculousness. The joke is, after all, an unconscious work of the mind evading awareness of an alternative language in which senseless events make sense, an alternative temporality shattering chronology and replacing it with narrative and allegories.\(^4\) In “Sealed Off,” the phantasmagoric interiority of Shanghai emerges as an urban unconscious that functions as a language of the Lacanian Other. When this Other, in the image of a subversive allegorist, contemplates the petrified history of modernity as the city comes to a standstill, the frozen temporality and images of the modern city will flow into the open terrain of history. Through this language of the Other and in this image of the allegorist, Zhang Ailing is connected to, indeed anticipates, a
later generation of Shanghai writers. Shanghai and the Chinese modernity it has crystallized in its own mundane concreteness is fated to be represented in this allegorized space of history, as nostalgia becomes a cultural fashion and mode of historical imagination through which Shanghai seeks to re-connect to its own past while striving to regain its place in the national and transnational markets of the 1990s.

The Politics of Writing Shanghai

As Zhang Ailing joined the ranks of great modern Chinese writers since the late 1980s, the history of modern Chinese literature had been going through a thorough “re-writing” (chongxie). The revisionist movement in the study of modern Chinese literature was itself a product of a larger project of rethinking the historical experience of Chinese modernity as defined by the periods and paradigms of Enlightenment, revolution, and socialism. Disengaging sterile discursive officialdom; challenging the linear, teleological notion of modern Chinese history; and rejecting the dogmatic reduction of its sociocultural experiences into an orthodox illustration of the dominant ideology, new discourses and narratives emerged to create a more complex understanding of the past and a more polyphonic space of cultural production. The national priority of modernization and the stimulation by and absorption of the formal, stylistic, technical, discursive, and theoretical innovations in the West joined forces to produce a new cultural language of modernism, which in turn brought new articulations and nuances to the collective desire to become contemporaries of a universal history.

Zhang herself would probably be surprised by her posthumous rise to a cult object in Chinese literary circles, fetishized by those seeking to define a cultural heritage of modern China beyond the official genealogy of the People’s Republic (for whom Shanghai is a stand-in for a modernity that is more “universal” than that claimed by the Chinese revolution and socialism). The city she presented in “Sealed Off” was soon to be remembered, reinvented, and reproduced by a generation of nostalgic revisionists with no sense of her own dazzling irony.5

In 1990s China, as nostalgia became entangled with a (dys)utopian fervor to embrace global capital and its ideology, the appearance and normalcy
of the Shanghai modern entered intellectual and commercial circulation as the standard version of historical memory. This ideological short circuit between an underdeveloped bourgeois modernity of pre-1949 China (which now freely borrows its sensuous glamour from colonialism and imperialism as thoroughly depoliticized categories, i.e., in developmentalist terms) and the post–Cold War euphoria of a capitalist hyper-(post)modernity also gives rise to a literary-critical urgency (both inside and outside China) to establish a genealogy between Zhang Ailing and the contemporary literary discourses on Shanghai. Indeed, by defining Zhang Ailing as the origin of a particular literary mode of production—and by reducing to superficiality the complex inner conflict of her representations—the current Zhang craze (and for Zhang’s Shanghai) becomes a coercive ideological discourse whose free-market dogmatism and empathy with a bourgeois universal history underscore the pleasure of the cultural fashion of nostalgia.

A profound ambiguity in post-Mao Chinese social and cultural spheres stems from the ongoing intellectual struggle to come to terms with the origins of a Chinese modernity intertwined with, but not completely falling into or exhausted by, the history of Chinese revolution. The Chinese phase of “postmodernity,” if such a label is justifiable, corresponds with the particular daily experience of “leaving the Revolution,” namely, postsocialism in the context of market-oriented reform and the concomitant changes in political-ideological structure. The disoriented sense that “something is over” has created a window of opportunity to redefine the Chinese modern by reconstellating the past in terms of a future nurtured in a global context of ideology.6 Shanghai and its rewriting become the focal point for larger cultural-ideological realignment and repositioning.7

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

Shanghai nostalgia, in other words, is inconceivable without a homecoming—imagined or real—of global capital and ideology in postrevolutionary China. Thus Shanghai has come to symbolize the nativization or internalization of the capitalist universal after the Chinese stage of revolutionary cosmopolitanism described so passionately by Joseph Levenson. From the return of the foreign banks to their original buildings on the Bund to the meticulous restoration of the Peace Hotel’s (Heping fandian, known to westerners as Cathay Hotel) 1920s-style lobby and jazz music tradition, Shanghai’s embrace of the brave new world has been accompanied by a quaint colonial sophistication and narcissistic self-awareness unseen in the new business districts in Shenzhen or Beijing. The imagination of a global modernity is so completely accommodated or consumed by the “rediscovery” of the city’s past glory in the colonial/imperialist system that suggests a collective mental blackout, properly described as a postrevolutionary melancholy. Thus nostalgia has become a way for Shanghai residents to absorb a socioeconomic shock, culturally, as the tidal wave of commodities and consumption is seen through the misty veil of past images made vivid by an avalanche of old photos, calendars, postcards, cigarette boxes, and commercial ads beautifully reprinted and sold as “classics” (jingpin).

Indeed, contemporary Shanghai nostalgia emerges with the postsocialist urban consumer masses and their obsession with searching for a classical moment of Chinese bourgeois modernity, whose feudal and colonial birthmarks are now indistinguishably mingled with commercial logos and signs. As a commercially viable fashion in China’s newfound mass cultural industry and an emotional valorization of the semiautonomous intellectual discourses in the 1990s, nostalgia can be considered as a sentimental Chinese response to a global ideology, whose singularity lies precisely in its homesick longing for a futurological utopia hinged on some earlier or more classical phase of world capitalism, on something Shanghai once was or at least could have been. In the Chinese context, the last trend seeks to replace the incomplete, unsettled, and open-ended project of Chinese modernity with an empathic projection of the present onto the larger constellation of historical
ages in which revolution and socialism are to be erased or suspended as a violent interruption. This is the context in which Zhang Ailing, a ruthless satirist of China’s “semi-feudal, semi-colonial society,” has nonetheless been appropriated as guardian angel of a city whose physical space and quotidian density stand as a timeless reminder of a historical temporal order undisturbed by revolution. Yet an allegorical reading revealing the convergence of social, political, psychological, and symbolic forces is needed to allow us to see not only “the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled,” as Walter Benjamin wrote on the very last page of his essay “Paris: the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” but also the laborious processes by which the monuments are imitated and rebuilt, symbolically and otherwise, in other parts of the world, as time moved on—and by which the bourgeoisie achieved its political afterlife in postsocialist China along with the “upheaval of the market economy.”

The City in Disorder: Class and the Continuum of History

Wang Anyi’s writings on Shanghai in the 1990s can be regarded as a forceful response to Zhang Ailing’s work in the besieged city half a century ago. This kinship relationship, however, is meaningful only upon an explicit rejection of the superficial semblance and thematic continuity between the two. Wang Anyi herself is keenly aware of the differences. To media attention to her work with reference to Zhang’s—and especially to the role assigned her by some critics as an “heir” of a certain Shanghai-style literature—she bluntly replies that her personal and literary experiences were shaped by the collective history of the People’s Republic: that contemporary Chinese literature must somehow come to terms with its place in the neocolonial world system.  

Whereas the disturbances and destruction of bourgeois consciousness in Zhang Ailing are captured in the image of a city at a standstill, in Wang Anyi’s 1993 “A Tale from the Cultural Revolution” (Wenge yishi), this narrative logic is recapitulated in a different order. The disintegration of the class codes, which alone proves the presence of class as a sociopolitical subjectivity, reveals the real sociopolitical dynamism of a seemingly ossified everyday world as the city plummets into the vortex of the Cultural Revolution. What
in fact connects Zhang Ailing and Wang Anyi, therefore, is neither nostalgia nor a literary redemption of the city’s glamorous decadence, but an allegorical contemplation and a sustained narrative elaboration that transform the silence of a petrified history into a *durée* of concrete historical time.

In Wang’s “Tale,” the city once again dozes—paralyzed, disgraced, brought to its knees—but here the cause is a political storm created by the Maoist revolutionary frenzy in 1966, seventeen years after the “Paris of the Orient” fell to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) divisions led by Marshal Chen Yi. But the city, as a few nostalgic wanderers in Wang Anyi’s stories discover to their own disbelief, refuses to yield to the crippling effects of time, aging, or bad luck. Resiliently, Shanghai appears and reappears throughout the story, often in the most unexpected moments, to threaten to outsmart and outlive its peasant conquerors and the brutal system they imposed on it. The untold stories of the city, to be sure, can be organized only as someone else’s language, its real temporal experience represented in someone else’s time. In Wang Anyi, the urban unconscious of Shanghai is indeed structured as a language, a language of an Other so alien to the narcissistic collective consciousness of the city: that of socioeconomic history centered on class.

Wang Anyi is unparalleled when it comes to recognizing the old in the new, or to, be precise, the mingling and coexistence of different temporal-historical structures in the fabric of the everyday life of Shanghai. “A Tale” opens with a Balzac-style introduction of its male protagonist, Zhao Zhiguo, and his fiancée, a former capitalist’s daughter, Zhang Siye:

Zhao Zhiguo was an elite in the shabby alleys of Shanghai. On the barren, grayish streets of the city during the 1970s, he carried an elevated, even noble air. When he showed up, six-foot tall, whistling by on a three-speed bike, it seemed he could always take your breath away. His hairstyle, toned down by the revolutionary age, revealed a modern touch of the bygone era. His face bore a vague resemblance to that of Marlon Brando’s, a subdued version as well. When he entered a teachers’ college in Shanghai as a member of the Working Class Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team, Zhang Siye quickly revised her idea about the working class.

Unlike the proletarian described in school textbooks, in Shanghai the term *working-class young men* meant someone who could afford a bicycle and,
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the next year, a watch, and who could dress fashionably; as a provincial 
term it signified a lack of education and even aspiration. Zhang Siye would 
never have imagined herself with such a person, except in the current social 
conditions. It is, of course, these persisting economic and class relations 
that the new society’s ideological puritanism sought to eliminate. But instead 
these relations constitute the city’s unconscious. It takes Wang’s observant 
eye to turn this unconscious into a narrative, in which class—its suppression, 
distortion, memory, and restoration—becomes the secret interior through 
which the invisible city reveals itself. In this regard Wang proves herself 
Zhang’s successor. The crossing of the class line, the exchange of places by 
members of different classes, is staged as a chaos that makes palpable an 
imagined order, a secular utopia. It is only fitting that Wang starts the story 
with a phenomenological reduction of a working-class young man into a 
consumer. Less than her blunt subversion of the official representation of the 
Chinese working class, the passage’s effect lies in her intimate knowledge of 
the culture of consumption and its psychology and ideology in the 1990s. By 
decoding the class-based language of Shanghai everyday life, Wang shows 
us the archeological layers of the social history of the city.

As class serves as the entry point into Wang Anyi’s allegorical cycle of 
Shanghai, class analysis becomes a literary perspective that unravels the 
sentimental facade of the city created by memory and nostalgia. Like the 
tram car in Zhang Ailing and the “irrational” temporality within its space, 
class consciousness in Wang Anyi, often in the form of the self-consciousness 
of the petit bourgeois urbanites of Shanghai, turns the city inside out and 
reconnects the city to its older and more durable—as it seems to that class 
consciousness—order imagined by its nostalgic beholders, an order whose 
radical opposite, chaos, comes into life in the form of the Cultural Revolution. 
In Zhang Ailing, the city at a standstill destroys the middle-class normalcy 
and rationality of the modern metropolis at work; in Wang Anyi, the city in 
chaos falls back to its prehistory and mental underground with an unhappy 
consciousness and an unsettling, comical sense of mockery and irony.

By the 1960s Shanghai had already been transformed into a sprawling 
manufacturing center of socialist China, with by far the largest, best-trained, 
best-organized, and most politically conscious working-class population. 
During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the city once again
resumed its pre-1949 place as a center of radical politics and mass movement. As Mao battled the state bureaucracy in the besieged capital, Shanghai took the lead in launching theoretical offensives in his spirit, preparing a cadre of radical intellectuals and leaders of workers’ organizations that later took over the power center of the Chinese Communist Party and mobilized tens of thousands of workers and students for the ever-renewing revolution. The Shanghai People’s Commune was founded in 1967, after the January Revolution, which overthrew the city government and party apparatus. Wang Anyi, however, is concerned with neither the statistical truth of Shanghai as the workshop of communist China nor its status as the center of working-class radicalism. Rather, she focuses on the ways in which the Shanghai urbanites remain deeply embedded in consumerism and nostalgia for a consumer’s life-world despite Shanghai’s physical metamorphosis from a city of consumers to producers and from a cultural to a political center. Through this consumerism and nostalgia Shanghai becomes a city resisting the nation, a culture resisting nature, a history resisting premodern atemporality. It is the fascination with the superficial and frivolous that enables Wang to delve deep into the heart of Shanghai as an interiority, a supernature, a dream, and a nostalgic utopia.

During the 1980s the Fifth Generation filmmakers, in their effort to capture the “physical reality” of Chinese life, turned their eyes to the rugged yellow earth of the Chinese countryside for inspiration. For them the country, rather than the city, provided the milieu for an aesthetic flight of modernism in the absence of a developed urban, market economy. In the 1990s, however, the cultural-intellectual focus has moved unequivocally to the city. Compared with the Bazinian ontological intensity of the cinematography of the early Zhang Yimou or Tian Zhuangzhuang, Wang Anyi’s Shanghai writing is decidedly Proustian. In the place of silent barren mountains rolling toward the sky, the houses and back lanes of the city are filled with witty conversations and relentless gossip; intricate codes of dress, dining, and socializing observed with religious care; and arabesque patterns and mannerisms in both private and public domains that are taken as matters of life and death for those leisurely regulars. In the place of the forced philosophical mortification of the cultural 1980s, Wang conveys a sense of history through the thicket of literary and sociological concreteness, through the
“trivial details” (suosui de xijie) that constitute the physical and mental life-world with which her characters stick in a selfless fashion. As she wrestles with the smooth, intricate facade of the trained, ritualized appearance of the Shanghai urbanites, Wang never loses her penetrating intuition of the fantasy world and political unconsciousness of this form of life. This makes her work appear anachronistic in the 1990s Chinese literary field, dominated by the glistening simulacra of the immediate present, in which the cultural fashion of nostalgia—and the cult objects invented by it—resides.

For Wang Anyi, it is impossible to understand Shanghai without intimately knowing its elaborate class codes and its irrepressible passion for trivial details of mundane gratification grounded on this class-determined culture. The depth of the city lies in its middle-class longing (and its backward projection in the form of memory and nostalgia), in this imagined identity’s constant love affair with itself, and in its undivided loyalty to a lost form of life that once actually existed right here. All of this explains Shanghai urbanites’ collective absentmindedness throughout the political and economic agitation of the socialist nation-state, an aloofness that stood in stark contrast to its Cultural Revolution radicalism. For Wang’s typical Shanghai urbanite, the nation-state is a mysterious, Beijing-based network of bureaucracy, power, and politics in which Shanghai is helplessly captive. To the extent that Beijing defined the daily reality of the nation, Shanghai was in a perennial state of daydream and schizophrenia. The gap between reality and dream is measured not only by Shanghai’s detachment from the other national city, but even more so by its distance from those often underdeveloped, generic, vulgar, and shapeless provincial capitals—to say nothing of the countryside—constructed during the Maoist period.14

Thus, to read Shanghai as a city is to read the grudging marriage between its residual, actual (petit) bourgeois/middle-class culture/everyday sphere and the abstract concepts, jargons, discourses, and politics of Chinese socialism. The introductory paragraph from “A Tale” soon evolves into an even more Balzacian analysis of class background, a politicoeconomic assessment of the marriage between two people from different class backgrounds. Zhao’s working-class background offers protection to Zhang Siye, making it easier for her as a graduating college senior to remain in Shanghai, while the Zhang family’s old money and lingering social distinction make
possible an imagined homecoming for the free-floating individual, as well as an ideological legitimation of the search for a Shanghai identity beyond its stage of socialist industrialization. Although politically defenseless, the material well-being and symbolic power of the Zhang family are as real as the solid family house in the “upper corner” of the city. This prestige was protected by the communist government’s “new democratic” approach, which allowed members of the former “national bourgeoisie” (as opposed to colonial or bureaucratic members) to live comfortably off the dividends of their shares in the nationalized enterprises. The only “regrettable” thing is that Miss Zhang looks like “a girl of modest background,” whereas Zhao, on the contrary, “appeared as if he was the prince of business tycoons” (“Tale,” 426). A Marxist sociologist may be alarmed by Zhao’s class metamorphosis, but the author seems to tell us that this transformation merely indicates a stable ideological structure that the New Society never managed to weed out in the first place. The dramatic twist of this predictable, causal relationship between such ideological structures and a seamless economic rationality is that the latter is based on sheer chaos, on the destruction of the normalcy of socialist everyday life. The marriage looks so logical only because the times themselves are totally out of joint. “That they did come together was entirely because the times themselves became so absent-minded,” amid the larger “existing chaos” (“Tale,” 426).

It is noteworthy that Wang often writes at the ground level, so to speak, making her narrative perspective virtually indistinguishable from that of an average Shanghai dweller. As a result, the ruthless sense of irony comes out of the depth of these alienated lives. Even though Zhao Zhiguo is “unparalleled in sensing the cream of life . . . no matter how deeply it is concealed,” when he faces the women of the Zhang family for the first time, he feels nervous. A casual smile appears on his face, as he realizes how acutely he is aware that “he was confronting the other class camp in its entirety,” that “this was truly a class struggle” (“Tale,” 429). He is not alone in this struggle. Hu Dijing, Zhang Siye’s sister-in-law, immediately recognizes a “lower-class man” in Zhao’s handsome appearance, due in part to her own lower middle-class background and her precarious place in the family. Their mutual recognition is the basis of a bond, and soon an “immoral entanglement” between the two, which, however, does not prevent Hu from eventually driving Zhao, a
potential threat to her husband’s inheritance, out of the Zhang estate. Thus Zhao ends up as an outsider of both working-class Shanghai and bourgeois Shanghai. The story ends with Zhao roaming the city day and night, finally realizing that there is no place for him and his wife in the city they thought was theirs by birthright. They finally leave Shanghai to work in a small town hundreds of kilometers away.

Within this narrative framework Shanghai emerges as an object of nostalgia, a sentimental excess and melancholic loss. In this light Shanghai also reappears as a cold, exclusive, class-coded castle; a network of conspiracy; and a collective longing for the past. Contrasted with the loveless marriage between Zhao Zhigu and Zhang Siye, the guarded adulterous intimacy between Zhao and Hu occupies the center of the drama. Both have spent their adolescence in the last days of old Shanghai, with their concept of romantic life shaped by Hollywood movies. Neither has forgotten the ballroom dance steps, remembered when they touch in the kitchen during family parties. It is, moreover, through this relationship of attraction and betrayal that the city looks like an “enormous stage setting of a foreign drama” in an era when “everything had reached its end,” as the city’s children prepared for removal to the remote Chinese countryside. The Cultural Revolution, in which the past exists as longing and as a trace, “was also an era to say goodbye to the old days,” even as the ivy “grew particularly lush” on the colonial, “European-style buildings” (“Tale,” 443).

To Zhang Siye and her naive younger sisters, this is the nightmare into which they sink. Equally out of synch with his time, Zhao Zhigu walks amid the city’s ruins, paying his homage to Shanghai as a late-born, awed by the city’s charm instead of threatening to blast the bourgeois values into pieces. In his empathic melancholy the exterior and the interior come together: “The [Zhang family] house was filled with residues of a bygone era, like a ruin of a once prosperous dynasty. The tile on the mantelpiece with European landscape paintings on it; the hot-water fossil covered with rust above the bathtub; the dust-piled heaters; . . . all this carried a solemnly graceful atmosphere.” In this atmosphere of degenerated prosperity, “he could not get rid of the feeling that nothing was real, that everything was floating, vacuous; he felt as if he were not part of reality” (“Tale,” 437).
This can be considered as a variation of the tram car theme in Zhang. The mode of existence of many of Wang Anyi’s Shanghai characters is inconceivable without this sense of alienation from real time. Here Shanghai, like Baudelaire’s Paris, not only is seen from the perspective of a flaneur but is immersed in an ominous aura of historical terror. From such psychological distance, cast in the light of melancholy, the physical web and cultural institutions of the modern metropolis would look as ancient as a subterranean archeological site. Whereas in Baudelaire à la Benjamin the poetic perspective of an alienated man captures the allegorical truth of bourgeois civilization, in Wang Anyi the disintegration of the temporal order of socialist modernity becomes palpable in the returning gaze of the city so determined to escape revolution. Both reveal the persistence of history underneath change, the constant amid the ephemeral. Yet, by means of allegory, Wang Anyi’s writings bestow upon the modernist fixation with history a sense of irony that runs against the grain of the fashion of nostalgia in 1990s China.

In Wang Anyi, Shanghai is equally adept in concealing its secrets as in revealing them, in the most trivial, sensuous manner and with an almost religious seriousness. In “A Tale,” as in several other recent stories, Wang conjures a mysterious quality of city life that rests beyond the vicissitudes of class and social change: the delicate mundane everyday life that dissolves or absorbs the shock of history and replaces the latter’s “grand narrative” with its own nostalgic supplement, a mode of consumption (instead of production) elevated to become an “art of life.” A passage extolling precisely described cuisine begins with the declaration, “Everything here is rich in flavor and meaning.” It concludes, “Life in Shanghai turns itself into a form of art while transforming everything lofty into a concrete everyday matter. It surrounds you, covers you, leaving you no way out” (“Tale,” 467).

The last refuge from history, the everyday sphere is also a training ground for a leap into an imagined universality that has its vulgar version in Francis Fukuyama’s declaration of the “end of history.” Zhao Zhiguó’s sorrow both offers an instant reflection of his own precarious situation, his homelessness in the class-determined social space, and stands as a premature, ill-fated invocation of the age of saturate consumption, the matter-of-fact reality of our present times, which is still experienced by him in vague, aesthetic
obscurity. At what was once the Hardoon Garden, now a towering Soviet-style exhibit hall, the very name brings “him a flavor of Shanghai’s origin and its adventure.” The red star twinkling in the foggy night somehow loses its immediate political significance and reminds him of “the city’s inexhaustible affection and charm, its enchanting atmosphere, even in its extraordinary decline” (“Tale,” 468).

The nostalgic gaze searches for, to be sure, not the vainglory in the remains of the city but, rather, the tangible, physical proof that a bourgeois/middle-class life-world once actually existed and still persists in the long night of revolution, as a “dim glow above the city.” Zhao’s sentimental excess responds to both the undeniable (pre)existence of that world and its equally undeniable deterioration. He feels truly at home only in this backward-looking utopia, which is mass-produced in the cultural market of the Chinese 1990s as one of the standard images of the future. He does not consider the socio-economic reality of the nebulous class category to which he belongs, which has rendered him homeless.

In fact, the sociological link between Zhao Zhiguo and the old Shanghai (and, by extension, between old Shanghai and its postsocialist revival) is none other than consumerism. As a social ideology, consumerism presents itself as a form of culture, in which individual consumers achieve a degree of freedom not readily available in economic or political reality. In this ideology one is not defined by the social class to which one belongs but, rather, by what one consumes. In the ideology of consumerism and its “aesthetic” aura, a member of the postrevolutionary masses is no longer a negligible number in the impersonal social organization of labor but the master of one’s self-image, self-production, and reproduction, and of one’s “identity.” This idea of freedom via consumption defines the political content of the apolitical resignation of the Shanghai urbanites from national politics and from any concept of collectivity except that defined by consumption. In Shanghai nostalgia, the internal coherence and persistence of this culture often translates into a supernatural monument at which the past and the future converge in the varying constellations of history.

In 1990, on the very site of the former Hardoon Garden, one more luxury hotel was erected: the forty-eight-story, five-star Shanghai Portman,
designed by American Joseph Portman, son of the famous John Portman. Twice the height of the symbol of old Shanghai, the International Hotel (Guoji fandian, known to westerners as the Park Hotel) on the Bund, the new hotel drives home the city’s new image as the future financial center of Pacific Asia. A young scholar doing research for a book on the changing urban culture of Shanghai roamed from one luxury hotel to another. Amazed by their otherworldly extravagance, which would soon become part of the new urban legend of Shanghai in the 1990s, the author imagined what the city would look like from the window of the $1,500-per-night presidential suite at the forty-second floor of the Garden Hotel. Inside is an “imported” vision seen “only in western movies about upper-class life.” But outside is “a vast, greyish, dust-covered Shanghai, resembling the operating ground of a huge cement factory,” choked in smog, whose “proportion has long been destroyed by clusters of monotonous, coarse, unimaginative working-class residences.”

The view from within this actualized space of global (post)modernity in 1990s Shanghai, in its crude symmetricality and complementarity, looks out on the physical environment in which Zhao Zhiguo, a working-class young man in Shanghai in the late 1960s, had once searched for nostalgic sublimation. Yet the contemporary journalist cannot sustain this vision, being “unable to determine the relationship between the hotel and the city.” The misty picture from Zhao’s earlier point of view becomes even more blurred, as nostalgic vision is replaced by pollution and overconstruction as Shanghai dismantles and rebuilds itself with a vengeance. In retrospect, Zhao’s sentimental moment on the rooftop above the former Hadoon Garden might have been the last time old Shanghai was still visible. As global capitalism and postsocialist consumer masses rise on the horizon, Shanghai finally loses its identity as the uneven, tension-charged terrain of history yields to the postmodern sense of flatness and evenness, as the past disappears into the future through the consumption of nostalgia. To this extent Wang Anyi’s writing about Shanghai is not only satirical but more urgently a rescue effort, an attempt to redeem the city as it is dissolving into what Benjamin calls “empty, homogeneous time” measured by the statistical fluctuations of the stock market.
Longtang is the Shanghai locals’ term for lilong. As long means a lane and tang the front room of a house, longtang either refers to a lane that connects houses or a group of houses connected by lanes. Longtang however might not be so explicit as lilong for the li in lilong means neighborhood. People living in a longtang actually live in a neighborhood. —From Shanghai Longtang

While London, Paris, Beijing, and Tokyo are forced to define themselves vis-à-vis their own medieval or ancient origins, Shanghai’s identity is thoroughly modern, with no significant past or memory prior to its founding as a treaty port, an event marking the global expansion of capitalism and colonialism in the nineteenth century. Compared to another quintessential modern metropolis, New York, which was initially defined against the wilderness and the frontier and through this tension participated in the building of a new republic, Shanghai’s self-consciousness is inconceivable without a negative notion of the nation and an ideological equation of the rest of the country with darkness, backwardness, and chaos. Unlike Petersburg, another crucial point of reference, Shanghai was not built on an inhabitable marsh on captured land by an imperial monarchy trying to catch up with the West, but first by foreign traders on Chinese land leased in perpetuity and held beyond Chinese jurisdiction, and later by Chinese immigrants who were driven to this Western enclave in “armed neutrality” by a string of peasant uprisings, civil wars, and natural disasters. From the beginning, Shanghai was called home by those who were too busy or opportunistic to care about the Chinese-barbarian dilemma when envisaging the material attraction and opportunities of the city. Unlike Tokyo, finally, it was never the seat of imperial power driving a national project of modernization. Rather, it was a place more or less abandoned by the celestial kingdom to the foreign devils in order to contain their greed and influence, a place that prospered as the rest of China plunged ever deeper into endless chaos. Its order was made and reinforced by a self-governing, self-regulating city council that consisted of wealthy, predominantly foreign taxpayers who took full advantage of the power vacuum of the semicolonies and wasted no time in creating a petit état dans l’état. Even though Chinese residents were treated at best as secondary citizens in the foreign concessions, the “ten-mile
foreign stretch” (shili yangchang) nonetheless constituted a TimeSpace outside the cycle of dynastic vicissitudes, despite—or because of—the security, lawfulness, convenience, and freedom that came with a modern urban infrastructure managed by a group of Western expatriates. It is against the rural or precapitalist background of old China as a premodern swamp that the urban jungle of Shanghai was often perceived by its Chinese or Western residents as a dynamic vanguard of history, an island of civilization, and the ultimate embodiment of the true present of modernity. It is against a corrupted history that the vitality of Shanghai was seen as a force of nature, whose explosive energy and transforming power were expected to forcibly yank China—or a particular group of Chinese—out of the vicious cycle of tradition.

Such mechanisms of pop psychology and intellectual discourse have effectively translated the overdetermination of Shanghai by the force field of the modern capitalist world system into a miraculous work of spontaneous natural energy. Thus the classical stage of the capitalist free market achieves its fairy tale version in this “heaven for adventurers” (maoxianjia de leyuan). As the front-stage heroes and heroines of Shanghai—financial speculators, robber barons, gamblers, prostitutes, gangs and hooligans, businessmen, journalists, writers, and movie stars—devoted themselves entirely to the eternal warfare in the urban jungle, middle-class Shanghai residents constituted the quiet background as well as the silent audience for this drama of natural history. This theater effect, in turn, gives rise to a sentimental valorization of the mundane material culture based on a new mode of production, as if one can naturalize or internalize what is most artificial by turning it into a spectacle, a cult object. This sociocultural greenhouse explains the miniature sublimity Shanghai lovers never fail to find in the thickets of trivial mundanity and the total urban concealment of nature as such. In other words, the natural-historical sublimity of Shanghai is only attainable as a picture drawn from the massive and the inhuman, from the awe of the individual to whom the politicoeconomic forces at work are completely invisible. In Wang Anyi’s grasp of the fleeting moment of the Shanghai sublimity, natural history is the mirror in which the melancholic subject sees his or her sociologically specific self-image as a consumer and in commodity fetishism. Only in the practice of commodity fetishism can the radically social be
understood in purely cultural terms. Culture thus defined proves to be more natural, that is, determining and conditioning, than nature itself, which has been done away with. This is the reason why Wang Anyi never hesitates to cast Shanghai in the most sublimated light of a natural wonder, because against the vast background of natural history, the minute working of the everyday unfailingly takes center stage.

To the beholders of its daily energy and architectural marvels, the modern big city unfolds like a sublime natural phenomenon. Boundless, invincible, passionate, commanding unthinkable energy, it is a greatness that touches, a beauty tinged with terror, evoking ecstasy, fear, reverence, and love. It thus offers moral catharsis for its tiny, fragile, rootless, free-floating, and insignificant inhabitants. This is the cult object, if not the religion, to which Zhao Zhiguo submits. The waning of the (bourgeois) city as a sublime object is the sociological and psychological cause for his melancholia. The loss of Shanghai as a sublime object threatens to remove the psychologically vital link between an isolated, precarious urban middle class and a universal high culture that gives meaning to its form of life and places this form in the larger framework of historical time. It is in the city as an allegorical fortress that a historically specific—and historically challenged—form of life is anchored and sublimated. To sublimate in this context is to transfigure the total organization of labor vis-à-vis nature, which is embodied by the modern industrial city. The ideological function of this sublimation—through urban planning, propaganda, strategies of representation, tourism, and above all consumption—becomes all the more important precisely because of urban life’s deliberate and seamless insulation from nature and from the larger, diverse human communities and experiences.

Nostalgia as a fashion in the Chinese cultural market in the 1990s sought to revisit and reactivate the sublime Shanghai by leaping back into the past, by re-creating the material-cultural atmosphere, thus overcoming loss in a virtual world of images and simulacra. A thoroughly postsocialist phenomenon, its indifference to the ideological, political struggle over the experience and representation of historical time is flanked by the radical conservatism of a post-1989 “liberal” Chinese intelligentsia, which called for an overall rethinking of the experience of Chinese modernity based on the universal, infallible mandate of the free market. The talk about a prerevolutionary
Chinese civil society and public sphere, the search for a history without the (socialist) nation-state, and the thinking aloud of a neoaristocratic liberty based on the marketization of power are all part of an intellectual and ideological context that, directly or indirectly, anticipates new representations of Shanghai.

In this sense, Wang Anyi’s 1995 novel Ballad of Eternal Sorrow (Changhenge), one of the most important Chinese literary works from the 1990s, is a critical breakthrough. The narrative’s main character is Wang Qiyao, a former Miss Shanghai and mistress of a powerful bureaucrat of the Nationalist regime who survives 1949 and goes on to lead a glamorous, often depressing life in Shanghai through the Maoist and Dengist years. Formed in the last days of the old Shanghai and never fully adapted to the new society, Wang Qiyao lives in her own world of dreams and nostalgia and in the endless parties with a few like-minded people who, like herself, still live in the “good old days” and retain their allegiance to a particular way of life. After several unsuccessful romances and an illegitimate daughter, Wang enters middle age and meets her younger generation admirers. The party seems ready to resume in post-Mao China. But she becomes targeted for the gold rumored to be left to her by the bureaucrat and is killed in a bizarre robbery-turned-murder. Only with her death does the murderer find that his victim is an ugly old woman.

In the novel the detailed chronicle of the indulgence and waste of the city, the Proustian depiction of the endless chatter and intricate rituals of the leisurely urban life prefigured in Wang Anyi’s earlier writings about Shanghai, finds its more developed form. With its subdued impulse to deliver an epic of modern Shanghai, the novel sets out to “capture the eternal within the ephemeral, and vice versa,” as Baudelaire challenged all modern poets to do. On one hand, the novel is an elegy for withering beauty, a recurring theme in classical Chinese literature immortalized by the long poem (from which the novel borrows its title) about the love-and-death story of the Ming emperor of the Tang dynasty and his beloved concubine, Yang Yuhuan, written by the great eighth-century Chinese poet Bai Juyi (Po Chu-i). On the other hand, it is a saga of modern Shanghai told ruthlessly and meticulously from the viewpoint of a class living in the heart of the dreams, fantasies, and everyday rituals of a Shanghai that ceased to exist after 1949. The fascination
with details and the striving for a totality of Shanghai as a crystallization of historical consciousness sets Wang’s work apart from the overcrowded field of marketing/consuming Shanghai. Moreover, for Wang Anyi, the self-sublimation the city seeks can only be found in its ironical, degenerated form of melancholy, that is, in the mourning of the lost, in which a phenomenological restoration of the void, rather than the glorification of a mythological past, proves vital in acquiring an astute sense of time and history for a complacently atemporal city. This leads to the intertwining of a holistic, total picture of a natural-historical movement and the ground-zero, close-range observation of a real or self-styled urban middle class. The natural-historical totality in the novel is made vivid at its beginning by a bird’s-eye view of the city:

At dusk, flocks of pigeons flew around in the sky of Shanghai, looking for their nests. The roofs of the houses formed an endless duration, rolling up and down, producing a changing image of mountains and hills. From this vantage point, they were all connected into a seamless mass, without boundary, making it impossible to tell the direction. . . . Massive and dense, [the rooftops] looked like a wheat field, sown and harvested; they also looked like a pristine forest, living and dying by itself.20

Under this allegorical contemplation, a pigeon cage hanging under a roof is an “empty heart” (Ballad, 6), just as the city seen from this imaginary vantage is a place where the master is not home. Hovering above and looking down at the oceanlike surface of roof tiles, the pigeons’ hearts are “broken by an astute pain” (Ballad, 7). And it is in this phenomenology of pain that the secret of Shanghai everyday life is experienced as a historical decay, whose silence can be understood only in an inhuman language spoken by the city as a natural-historical being. Before this state of existence finds its own verbal expression, the heaps of human activities stand wordlessly in their irredeemable thingness, entering the world of language only as isolated fragments, as images seen through the rear window, under the lone streetlight on the corner, or in a dark, damp lot never exposed to the sun, scarred over with moss. In Wang Anyi, this world before language is bathed in the illumination of the sublime; it is “a sublimity consisting of countless trivial details, a mighty power drawn from limitless patience” (Ballad, 7).
Shanghai viewed from this vantage point is reminiscent of the Paris depicted by romanticists such as Victor Hugo (to whom Baudelaire dedicated his three *Tableaux parisiens* poems). Indeed it is noteworthy that Wang often sees the new in the images of the old, and the historical in those of the natural. Comparing Baudelaire with Hugo, Benjamin observes that the latter’s poetic inspiration often comes from “the enormous antitheses” between natural-supernatural images—the forest or the sea, for example—on one hand, and images of the modern big city.

In Wang Anyi’s work, the causal chain of social-aesthetic production is often reversed. The elevated bird’s-eye view of the city that opens *Ballad of Eternal Sorrow* can be seen as a literary or an aesthetic warm-up, so to speak, for the true heroes of Shanghai, namely the nameless, shapeless consumer masses. It is pertinent to add that this aesthetic prehistory of the notion of the masses (deriving from the history of form in the modern West) corresponds to the social, material history of contemporary China, where the historical emergence of the postsocialist consumer masses demanded and indeed reactivated the historico-aesthetic images that swim toward the mind’s eye of an allegorical contemplator. It is no accident that Wang Anyi’s novel—instantly acclaimed as a long-awaited successor to Zhang Ailing’s writing about Shanghai in the 1940s, that is, as a welcome sign of restored historical and literary continuity—appeared in 1996, when the “socialist market economy” had placed China squarely within the productive and symbolic chain of the world market. After being the rear guard of Chinese economic reforms during the 1980s, Shanghai now spearheaded the new and most sweeping round of market-oriented economic reforms.

If one considers the new faceless consumer masses as the historical figure underscoring the images of the natural-historical sublime in Wang Anyi’s depiction of Shanghai, one can understand the deliberate absence of human presence, the lack of subjectivity in the beginning of the novel as the city unfolds in front of the reader. Again, Wang attempts to blend the sublime with melancholy, the mysterious natural world with the even more unfathomable social sphere. Thus the central symbolism of Shanghai in her novel is not the Bund with its glamorous banks, hotels, and parks, but the spiderweb of the modest residential lanes and buildings, the Shanghai consisting of the
longtang, where the bulk of the city’s middle-class population lived:

The Shanghai longtang constitutes a sublime (zhuangguan) picture. This is the background of the city. . . . At dusk, as the city is lit up, all those lines and spots [of streets and houses] shone; behind the glittering facade lay a massive span of darkness—the Shanghai longtang. The darkness looked like raging waves, pushing the spots and lines of light up and down; the darkness has its masses, whereas the bright spots and lines are merely floating upon it, as if its purpose for existing is to divide the masses. . . . The darkness was an abyss. Even if you tossed a mountain into the abyss, it would disappear into its unfathomable depth without creating a sound. (Ballad, 3–4)

Such natural, sublime images of Shanghai reveal the mental valorization constantly mobilized to hold off the forces against which the city is perceived as a cultural, civilized monument above sociopolitical vicissitudes. The concept of natural history (Naturgeschichte), which in Benjamin and Theodor Adorno signals liberation from the anthropocentric iron cage of rationality, historicism, and subjectivism in order to envision a concrete history as dialectical nature, can also be employed for the opposite purpose of formulating a bourgeois—or any ruling class’s—social utopia of the city as an aestheticized world of unmediated nature by means of which an alienated way of life is perpetuated. So, too, the Marxist ideal of a naturalized humanity and a humanized nature transcending the modern “administered society” has its conservative counterpart in a Social Darwinist picture of the world as a harmonious blending of nature and history into an insulated social sphere dominated by the “law of the jungle.” Moreover, Benjamin’s insight that “it is the fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history” often meets its post-1992 Chinese appropriation in the effort to identify the age of revolution with totalitarian control and “disastrous historical time.”

Taking the place of nature as a charged concept, the fallen city thus becomes the sphere of allegories, the pile of ruins of a historical catastrophe. If Max Pensky’s reformulation of the dialectic of natural history in Benjamin can be transferred to the ideological context of representing Shanghai, it will read like a posthistorical judgment on the past decades: “Petrified, transformed into the specter of repetition, history is transfigured into dead nature;
mortified, nature becomes the elements of historical ruin and the universality of death.”

Wang Anyi turns to concrete history, which reveals the dialectic of nature. The descent of the narrative viewpoint into the world of the longtang makes natural-historical time vivid in social, class terms. The sublimated images of the Shanghai longtang, the natural-historical aura bestowed upon its massive physical span and its unfathomable storehouse of daily experiences of the modern big city, provide an allegorical substitute for the missing sociological account of its historical formation. As an architectural, social, and psychological space, the longtang is the embodiment of middle-class Shanghai, its privacy (or lack of it) and its material culture (or its “transcendence”); it records the ways and gestures by which this middle class shelters itself from the brutal forces of history. What is gestating in Wang’s natural-historical portrayal of the longtang is precisely the memory, repression, and violence of the city, filling the silence and omissions of the endless chatter of a declining Shanghai middle class.

But a culture without a nation can only be defined and understood in terms of class, in terms of its identity with and aspiration for a transnational community as a way of life. The renewed enthusiasm over Shanghai, both inside and outside China, can thus be regarded as the reemergence of a particular class interest and identity in search of their spatial articulation, often by means of redefining history in terms of culture. In this sense the cultural pride of the Shanghai middle class, its endless love affair with its own form of life, is but a disguised, inarticulate (because it is so entangled with the day-to-day struggle to maintain this status) class consciousness.

If the darkness of the world of the longtang behind the shining facade of the city looks mysterious to the narrator, the beholder of the natural-historical spectacle, it is because the veil of nostalgia and melancholy through which the city is revealed also functions as a screen obscuring the economic and material basis of the urban maze. The logic of the market and the commodity—let alone that of production—is often experienced with the least clarity by those who live it in the most bodily, mundane way as consumers. Their distance from production, their exclusion from the real mechanisms of power, and their comfortable distance from poverty make their mode of life “aesthetic” if not ritualistic. In Wang Anyi’s novel, a vague awareness of class emerges
only briefly, in the form of envy and resentment. Weiwei, who grows up in the glamourless age of socialist industrialization, like all the teenage girls living in the central commercial section of Huaihai Lu (formerly Joffré Road in the upper-class French concession), is seduced by the store windows and hates the invisible residents of the quiet, shop-free western section of the street where the real owners of the city live. It is worth noting that the city’s change of hands from business tycoons to communist bureaucrats, a transition that devastated Wang Qiyao, no longer matters to Weiwei and her friends. This ignorance of the economic and power structure conditioning their own mode of existence enables much of the sentimentalism of the story’s nostalgic dreamers. It also reveals the ignorance of the working-class reality that surrounds the orderly enclave of the International Settlement, not to mention the dark, rough ocean of peasant China that threatens to swallow the shiny, self-gratifying island of Shanghai.

Wang Anyi’s natural-historical approach to Shanghai is not only indicated by its effort to intertwine the city’s contentless fantasy (its shining facade, its middle-class rituality, etc.) with its voiceless reality (mode of production, class relations, and soon); it is also illustrated, moreover, in an attempt to endow the voiceless with a language. In Benjamin the normal, oppressive relationship between nature and history is defined by the former’s muteness and the latter’s possession of a profane language. The idea of natural history, however, is based on a subversive reversal of this relationship, namely, on the critical hypothesis of nature being able to speak. The sigh of fallen nature or petrified history can be heard in Ballad of Eternal Sorrow, between the hovering pigeons and the world of the longtang, in the intermediary layer that brings the finishing touch of the natural-historical being that is the modern big city. This is the world of gossip (liuyan, literally, free-floating words). In a city so obsessed with its privacy, so determined to reject the notion of a meaningful public life, and so preoccupied with perpetuating its ritualistic mannerism of mundane enjoyment, gossip is the medium by which the Shanghai dwellers communicate and relate to one another. Indeed, in the absence of a developed public sphere, the mass media define their community and culture. If the pigeon is the “only living thing that could overlook the city from above” (Ballad, 16), and if what is under the sky is nothing more than “a city of cement... an enormous abyss in which ant-like lives were
struggling,” then the realm of gossip, the world of free-floating, subjectless language, brings the two spheres together and endows the city with not only a form of life but its expressivity. In the longtang, “gossip traveled from one backdoor to another . . . like silent electric waves, crossing and interacting with each other above the city.” Compared to “invisible clouds covering the city,” it “soak[s] the air” and “occupies every corner of the city” (Ballad, 8).

Thus, the subterranean stream of free-floating words is to Shanghai longtang as the disoriented signs inside the tram car are to the symbolic order of the city before it is sealed off. Both embody an inverted, dream logic of the daily, rational experience of modern city dwellers; both offer a subversive replacement of the legitimate temporality; both reveal the repressed unconscious as the obscure inner landscape of urban everyday life. Wang Anyi continues: “If the longtang of Shanghai could dream, its dreams would be filled with nothing but gossip” (Ballad, 8). Gossip is, moreover, both the “thought” and the “talk” of the longtang. This leads to the core of the historical time in Ballad, a core consisting of sorrow and the mournful. For Benjamin, again via Pensky’s succinct summary,

Were nature endowed with language, its mournfulness would instantly spring forth into an endless lament. Insofar as nature could be imagined to take part in profane language, its mournful silence would find its natural counterpart in lament, understood both as a response to its loss and degradation (nature would lament language itself) and as mode of linguistic expression in its own right (“it would lament”). Relieving nature of its muteness does not relieve it of its mournfulness: since lamentation is conceived as a profane translation of mourning into the meaningless chatter of the human tongue, it is envisioned as “undifferentiated” and hence “impotent.”

The Heart of the City: Postrevolutionary Melancholy

It is through the “profane translation of mourning into the meaningless chatter of the human tongue” that the central figure of Ballad of Eternal Sorrow—beauty—emerges and shapes the narrative space and temporal structure of the novel. And it is through the work of mourning and melancholia
that the natural-historical images of the city mingle with its sociohistorical counterparts. In a pedestrian sense, the novel is the life story of Wang Qiyao, former Miss Shanghai. It is mechanically divided into three parts: part 1 includes scenes from pre-1949 Shanghai; part 2 takes place between 1949 and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution; and part 3 covers the post-Mao era up to an unspecified, but readily recognizable, moment of the 1990s. Each part comprises four chapters consisting of a varying number of subitled sections, forty-four in all. The subtitles are bluntly thematic, bringing allegorical punctuation and articulation to an evolving durée of storytelling and its motifs. Running throughout is the entanglement and intertwining of the images of a woman and the images of the city, to the extent that the two become inseparable, even indistinguishable.

Effectively, the admiration and love of both men and women for Wang Qiyao is but an aestheticized, sometimes eroticized homage they pay to the city and its particular past. In Ballad, Shanghai unfolds along with Wang Qiyao. Indeed, the city prospers and withers with its heroine: in her humble background, her five-minute glamour in the limelight, and her willing possession by the powerful; in her undeceivable sense of life’s persistent treachery, which contributes to both her calculated struggle for security and her submission to fate; in her impeccable command of details and her unfailing ability to charm; in her glamourless survival as a part-time nurse in the “new society”; in her bizarre reunion with diehard Shanghai lovers of different periods (who seek the former Miss Shanghai in their quest for the residual evidence of the bygone era); and in her reluctant, unthinkably slow but nonetheless irreversible process of aging in what she considers a coarse environment. One may agree that the old Shanghai, just like Wang Qiyao herself, survived both the thuggish Nationalist regime and a more brutal People’s Republic like a tragic heroine, only to die a farcical death at the hands of a new age hooligan called Long Legs, a money changer who breaks into the home of a mysterious old lady looking for the universal currency of our time: U.S. dollars and gold. Not that her charm and seduction fail her this time, however. Before her death, Wang Qiyao, now in her late fifties, claims her last admirer-lover in a new generation dandy who, despite his formation during and after the Cultural Revolution, quickly recognizes in her the faded world of old Hollywood movies, old jazz music, nightclubs,
and upper-class society. For such young men (and women), it is an inspiration to discover that a more mature, subtle, and ritualized consumption once actually existed in China as an obscured chapter of their own past.

Corresponding to the allegory suggested by the story’s subtitles is a changing modality of the beautiful as seen through the eyes of Wang Qiyao’s male admirers and female friends and competitors. Her first appearance as an aesthetic object—to be precise, the first registering of the beautiful in the city’s self-consciousness as its own cherished mirror image—occurs fitfully, at a film studio, through the proper medium or technology of the camera (“Camera” [“Kaimaila”] is another subtitle in the novel). Wang Qiyao, then an eighteen-year-old student, soon learns that the moment the director cries “Camera!” a magic temporality starts; the camera filters a chaotic, shapeless reality, brightens up the dim, and produces a polished fantasy world that is always beautiful (Ballad, 30–31). Frequenting the film studio makes Wang feel that she is “behind the film screen,” and she “stumble[s] upon the key to a big secret” (Ballad, 30). She becomes both an object of an aesthetic gaze and a witness to the unveiled interiority of the concealed, intimate daily world of the urban middle class. One day her eye is drawn to an interior in which “everything . . . was extremely familiar.” The quotidian objects of “someone’s daily private life” are transformed into “public spectacle” (Ballad, 28).

From beginning to end, Wang Qiyao herself is not merely an exposed object of male gaze, a mirror image produced by the fantastic mechanism of the city, but, more important, an object/image equipped with an inner camera of self-consciousness. This allows her to roam between the innermost dream objects of the city like a modernist poet. Only she neither writes poetry nor is interested in maintaining any critical distance from her surroundings. Yet by virtue of her double identity/function, Wang Qiyao becomes an agent of dream narrative, a vehicle for the portrayal of the allegorical dimensions of the physiognomy of the modern metropolis. Significantly, the inside/outside exchange, captured in the imagery of a three-walled room, becomes a landmark in Wang Anyi’s Shanghai landscape. Many chapters later, after Mr. Cheng, a dedicated photographer and lifelong admirer of Wang Qiyao, throws himself out the window of his apartment as the Cultural Revolution begins, the author of Ballad of Eternal Sorrow once again allows her narrator
to roam across the city and contemplate its ruins. He muses on a building whose outer wall has been torn away: “All [the] rooms are naked, everybody is gone, the rooms have become rows of empty boxes. How can you imagine that once there were boiling scenes and matters of life and death inside those boxes?” Windows become “totally meaningless. The doors, too, become unnecessary, sentimental. . . . Oh, let us erect the wall once again, or else we can hear the sound of weeping, weeping for the disappearance of those days. Let the empty boxes be restored into a big building, and let the big buildings form a longtang. Let there be a main street before the longtang, and a back road behind it, let people and cars flow again on the streets (Ballad, 262). Similarly, in its appalling nakedness, Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution is seen as “a network of underground cells and rat-burrows exposed to the sun.” The longtang houses, “with their roofs torn open, their disgusting interior revealed,” begin to “pollute the sky of the city with a flood of private secrets.” The sorrow, from this literary viewpoint, is not so much over the loss of beauty as the loss of interiority, privacy, dignity, and shame, which are laid bare or “penetrated (chuantou)” by the violence of the revolution (Ballad, 258).

The death of the photographer Mr. Cheng, the only male who loves the former Miss Shanghai with all his heart (he never marries), marks the final, irreversible disintegration of the aesthetic spell cast on the city by its beholders. A railroad builder by training, “what occupied his heart was photography,” begins the section titled “Mr. Cheng” (“Cheng xiansheng”). “His idols were under the limelight, their images were always upside down; his idols were always in developing liquid, on a piece of paper, slowly taking shape in the red light” (Ballad, 67). The upside-down images in the camera eye strikingly recall the reversed, mirror image newspaper characters imprinted on the bun in Zhang Ailing’s “Sealed Off.” Both, in their orderly disorder, reveal the secret language that affords entry to the unconscious of the city. And like the bank accountant Lü Zhongzhen in “Sealed Off,” Mr. Cheng is a captive of the mysterious images he captures but does not know how to read. The images in the dark that constitute “the sole existence” in his world are “as empty as an abandoned cicada slough (chantui yiban, neili shi yituan kongxiu)” (Ballad, 248). It is only logical that “Mr. Cheng was among the first who committed suicide in the summer of 1966” (Ballad, 257).
death of the aesthete is followed by the city reduced to rubble, with “torn photos scattered around the garbage can, on which the partial human faces here and there looked like herds of ghosts who died of unjust treatment” (Ballad, 259).

The convolution of the female heroine and the city of Shanghai into a deadly seductress is perhaps best illustrated from a distance, in a passing yet important figure, Ah Er, a student living in the small town where Wang stays briefly on the eve of the “Communist takeover.” Like all melancholic lovers (of women and cities), Ah Er sees his object of love through the glorifying images of classical literature. He reads Wang Qiyao poems from the Book of Odes (Shijing), Li Bai (Li Po), and Bai Juyi’s The Song of Pipa (Pipa xing) and Ballad of Eternal Sorrow. Yet the nostalgic, sorrowful images of the poems, with their allusion to changes of dynasties, the displacement of people, their exile, and their tragic death, cast an ominous shadow on the woman before him. All the poems he quoted and presented to his idol point to one old Chinese idiom: “Beautiful ladies lead miserable lives (hongyan boming)” (Ballad, 51). In his mind, Ah Er can never separate his love for Miss Shanghai from his worship of the city for which the woman is named. As a country boy, however, he knows by instinct that “this woman was sent to seduce him,” that “the religion he worshiped was an unlucky one—the pursuit of ephemeral pleasure, not eternal happiness” (Ballad, 142). Whereas Ah Er misses Wang Qiyao, Wang Qiyao misses Shanghai. Ah Er soon disappears and never resurfaces.

In the character of Sasha we find a comic variation of Ah Er, but unlike that member of the provincial “transitional class,” Sasha is a literary hybrid of the “superfluous man” in Russian realism and the rigid daily reality of the early years of the People’s Republic. Half-Russian and with no job, he receives government welfare as one of the “children of revolutionary martyrs,” but it barely covers his expenses at the pool table. His exotic appearance, deceptively childish innocence, love of delicate food, and abundant free time soon win him a regular seat at the majiang party at Wang Qiyao’s apartment, attended by a small group of nostalgic, leisurely Shanghainese. In the feminine, domestic atmosphere of his room, this international superfluous man feels at home through the “enjoyment of a meticulously cultivated, carefully lived life (jingdiao xizuo de rensheng kuai le)” (Ballad, 183). Living contentedly
“contained in a snail’s shell,” he perceives “objects, space, voices, and atmosphere all . . . drifting apart, becoming misty and uncertain.” This “tender” and “sentimental moment by the fire melt[s] all kinds of desire into one single need to stick together, to depend on one another; it made everything else irrelevant . . . No need to think about the past. No need to think about the future” (*Ballad*, 184).

In such moments, the shadow binding these people together is the ineluctable passing of time. As if to stop the clock, they muddle through their days absentmindedly, so as to plunge into the night with energy, wit, bonhomie, and intimacy. They tell stories, solve riddles, invent silly games to play, and chat and eat endlessly. For Wang Qiyao, “it was like the Chinese custom of staying up all night on New Year’s Eve (*shousui*) to keep time from slipping away. Yet despite their . . . nightly effort, they could not keep time from passing by” (*Ballad*, 185). If parties are the heart of the night in Shanghai, then women like Wang Qiyao are the heart of the party. Perhaps it does take a drifter like Sasha to appreciate the Proustian indulgence of Chinese middle-class life most fully, with a sense of estrangement, exoticism, surprise, and gratitude for the memorial ritual, and with anticipation of the ephemeral life-form of an underdeveloped yet reified, long dead but still evolving protobourgeoisie, namely the Shanghai middle class. After a brief sexual relationship with the former Miss Shanghai, Sasha returns to the Soviet Union before the final split between the two communist states.

If the party in Wang Qiyao’s room constitutes a parody of the Parisian salon, then the reemergence of Miss Shanghai in the realm of memory bears the authentic aura of the *mémoire involuntaire*, as an unexpected reunion with the past considered forever lost. Kang Mingxun, another party regular and son of the mistress of a former Shanghai industrialist, finally completes the equation between Wang Qiyao and the former Miss Shanghai in one afternoon. For a long while he has been stirred by *déjà vu* at the sight of his graceful hostess at the nightly gatherings. Born at the juncture of the times, Kang “had seen many for whom the chain of history broke overnight, fell into pieces” irreparably. Yet the *longtang* where Wang Qiyao lived “was one of the cracks and gaps in the city, where some fragments and residue of a previous world were concealed.” Despite Wang Qiyao’s humble appearance, Kang perceives “something behind it . . . glowing and twinkling like a mirage”
In their brief, intense affair, the woman, “a relic of the old days, brought back his heart” (Ballad, 190–191).

But the love affair is hopeless because his family will never accept a woman with Wang Qiyao’s background and because Kang, as a mistress’s son, knows too well that he cannot do anything to harm his family’s interests. This dilemma allows Kang a momentary intuition into the vulnerability and helplessness of the class to which he and Wang Qiyao both belong: “Both Wang Qiyao and he himself were struggling for their survival in a narrow corner, and neither could afford extending help to others” (Ballad, 193).

Such a situation is typical. The hermeneutic circle in Ballad of Eternal Sorrow, and in virtually all of Wang Anyi’s Shanghai writings, always begins with aesthetics and love and ends with a cool-headed, unapologetic recognition of economic, social, and class positions and interests. Indeed, the longer the author allows the narrators to indulge in aesthetics and psychology, the more relentlessly the story swings back to the domain of calculation and “reality check” that constitutes the philosophical core of the self-consciousness of the true Shanghainese in this fictional world. The femininity and emotional delicacy of Miss Shanghai portrayed in this novel are inseparable from her ability to hold on to a self-consciousness and self-pity in the most antinarcissistic, unsentimental way. This ability is best depicted at an early moment of the story, when Miss Shanghai, still a nineteen-year-old student, experiences “just a little bit of regret” right before she gives her virginity to the rich, powerful, and older man Director Li, as something “rightfully his.”

From beginning to end, Wang Qiyao has a clear view of her own proper place—her class position—in the world. The secret of the city assumes some human proportion in part through pain; she is the heart of the city, weeping alone at night, when the concrete details of urban life have retreated. Recognizing themselves in each other, Wang Qiyao and Kang’s longing for a shared culture deposited in a past moment is sealed by an eternal sense of regret.

The devastated Shanghai middle class finds its heir in the Shanghai dandy, which defines the 1980s and 1990s China of the postsocialist consumer masses in a caricatured but sociologically important way. Dandies are ironically described as “some refined elements in this vulgar age” (Ballad, 326). Their collective name is nostalgia, as they, though young and without their own
memories, see “the Georgian-style buildings and the Gothic bell towers,” which are “like secret tunnels running through time. . . . The ivy on the gable, the piano music from a European-style building next [door], too, would make good food for nostalgia” (Ballad, 326).

Wylie Sypher has pointed out that a dandy is “a substitute for the aristocrat who has lost its castle. . . . a middle-class aristocrat, a figure who could make his entrance only in the cities that were becoming the milieu for the bourgeoisie.” Building on this observation, Richard Lehan notes that Baudelaire’s dandyism is both a mockery and a by-product of middle-class values, that the poet as a dandy distances himself from the bourgeois values that brought his culture into being, and that the desire for distance led Baudelaire to explore new poetic possibilities for the huge modern metropolis, prominent among which is “nostalgia for a spiritual homeland or city that existed beyond the visible world,” which goes hand in hand with an internalized “sense of decay and decline” that colors perceptions of the city. What Old Clas or Lao Kela and his fellow postrevolutionary dandies want, as the narrator in Ballad of Eternal Sorrow reminds us, is “a sense of timelessness—not one in cosmological proportion, but one which smugly covers the past fifty years when they flared up like a flying lightning bug.” They are the “intimate sons of the city,” or in the allegorical tone of the narrator, “it is the streets of West Shanghai that knew these kids best” (Ballad, 329).

Like her literary ancestors in early European and American realism (such as Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, and Theodore Dreiser), Wang Anyi seeks to restore the city to human proportions, as she seeks to enter the soul of the city so as to dream its dreams and roam inside its unconscious. For early modernists like Baudelaire, to experience the modern city with a poetic freedom is to assume the allegorical angle of an alienated human being or, better still, an object, a commodity joining the global journey of commodity exchange. In Wang Anyi, the nostalgic interior of the Shanghai middle class becomes an allegorical stand-in for the world of things and commodities through which a narrative totality of a historical experience can be had. This is the reason why the aura of nostalgia meets its ultimate disintegration, as Shanghai finally recognizes and tries to revive its own past in the booming market economy, as the once-empty streets are flooded with commercial logos and consumer crowds.
In light of this dispersal of the historical aura, Wang Anyi’s narrative of Shanghai becomes entangled with a profound ambiguity. In all of Wang’s writings about Shanghai, the reader can sense the constant work of a nostalgia and a melancholy that weave together the tight allegorical space. Neither nostalgia nor melancholy, however, is merely a matter of formal technique, but they both constitute the emotional atmosphere and underscore the sense of history that cries out from the mundane concerns and strivings of Wang’s characters. Yet in these allegories of Shanghai one will not find any utopian gesture of redemption, not even a guarded optimism for a rising everyday sphere in a China that may be well on its way to creating a new urban and political culture precisely by incorporating a reinvented past into the undefined present. To this extent the allegorist herself becomes a participant in a collective melancholy, nostalgia, and mourning, in a more politically urgent sense. This, I suggest, has everything to do with the loss of the immediate past for the Cultural Revolution generation (to which Wang Anyi belongs), for the children of Mao and their experiences and memories, all yet to be fully narrativized in the global context. In Wang Anyi nostalgia and melancholy are at once directed, with a sense of irony, toward a past associated with the unfulfilled dreams of bourgeois modernity and flow, somewhat unconsciously, out of the mourning for a more recent past shaped by socialist modernity as both a historical project and a form of life. It is the repression and resurgence of the latter in the political unconscious of postsocialist China that seems to shock even the nostalgic mourner. Thus, through shock, the ultimate allegorical figure in Wang Anyi’s Shanghai nostalgia reaches its radical Other, which it has been called forth to overcome in the first place. Wang Anyi’s writing of Shanghai constitutes her personal battle against this shock in the late-twentieth-century global social-ideological environment mediated by two decades of Chinese economic reforms. It is an effort to come to terms with Chinese modernity, which, for the mournful storyteller, means to make peace with all the dead in modern Chinese history.

**Notes**

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2 By the end of the 1940s Shanghai was by far the largest city in China and one of the biggest cities in Asia, with a population over 5 million. Meanwhile, the International Settlement expanded from 330 mu in 1843 eventually to 48,653 mu (8.67 square miles), an area ten times larger than the old Chinese city of Shanghai (Xu Run, Shanghai gongong zujie shigao [A history of the International Settlement in Shanghai] [Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1983], 13, 16). Before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, 81.2 percent of China’s foreign trade and commerce, 79.2 percent of foreign bank investment, 67.1 percent of industrial investment, and 76.8 percent of real estate investment were concentrated in Shanghai. Shanghai also represented half of the Chinese (excluding Hong Kong and Manchuria) industrial output, workforce, and capital value, as well as three-quarters of China’s banking industry (Tang Zhenchang, ed., Shanghai shi [A history of Shanghai] [Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1986], 9). In 1933 there were 3,421 factories and 34,000 stores in the International Settlement (Zhang Zhongli, ed., Jindai Shanghai chengshi yanjiu [Studies of modern Shanghai] [Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1992], 171). In the early decades of the twentieth century Shanghai published more than 85 percent of all China’s books, and 12.5 percent of Chinese women living in the International Settlement in Shanghai were believed to be prostitutes (Shanghai Historical Society, ed., Shanghaishi yanjiu [A study of the history of Shanghai] [Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1988], 2:131).


4 The dazzling literary debut of Zhang Ailing in isolated, besieged Shanghai during the Pacific War has for many also marked the apex of her literary career, despite her later works (some bordering on crude anti-Communist propaganda), written outside the mainland in the early years of the Cold War. With the publication of C. T. Hsia’s A History of Modern Chinese Fiction (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1961), she became the standard-bearer of a literary legacy erased from the media of Communist China.


6 For an account of Chinese postmodernism and its political implications, see Xudong Zhang,


10 Wang Anyi, “Wang Anyi yanzhong de dangjin wentan” [Chinese literature today in the eyes of Wang Anyi], *Shenghuo shibao* (Life times), June 2, 1999. This is reminiscent of the position of some of the Taiwanese nativist writers in the 1970s.


12 According to recent studies, between 1953 and 1978 the Shanghai economy grew at an impressive rate of 8.8 percent. This refutes the view promoted by the propaganda campaign of the Deng regime that the economy was sluggish due to Mao’s incessant mass movements and a rigid Stalinist central-planning system. Ironically, the city’s 7.5 percent growth rate during the period of reform and opening to the outside world (1979–1990) was slower, as well as below the national average during the same period. The relatively slow growth during the New Era is commonly held to be a result of Shanghai being the “rear-guard of Reforms”; with the largest concentration of state-owned enterprises, Shanghai was forced to take a conservative economic policy. Furthermore, home to only 1 percent of the Chinese population, it shouldered roughly 15 percent of the tax load of the central government up to the late 1980s. After 1992, when Deng Xiaoping pushed for even bolder reforms and Shanghai was allowed more financial latitude, both domestic and foreign investment soared. In 1993 Pudong (the area east of the Huangpu River) became the newest and most aggressive of the Special Economic Zones, and the city saw the most intensive urban construction in its history. As the business and administrative elite envision the city as the future economic center of East Asia, the public discourse on “revitalizing Shanghai” gives more than a hint that the new Shanghai is modeled after the old, namely the prerevolutionary, city.

13 Contrary to the pop culture depiction of the Cultural Revolution as “ten years of calamity,” the city maintained high productivity, a sustained growth rate and technological innovation, a good education system, and a vibrant mass-oriented cultural life. In fact, it was the success of socialist industrialization that destroyed old Shanghai. The thorough nationalization of the presocialist economy was completed in the 1950s, leaving virtually no room for the private sector. Remarkably, 54 percent of the economic growth during the Maoist period was
achieved thanks to technological innovation, compared with only 19.3 percent during the New Era. But most telling about the structural transformation of the Shanghai economy is the increase of heavy and manufacturing industry from 52.4 percent of the city’s gross product in 1952 to a stunning 77.4 percent in 1978 and, correspondingly, the decline of the service industry from 41.7 percent of the city’s gross product in 1952 to a mere 18.6 percent in 1978. These statistics show clearly that during the Maoist decades, Shanghai was transformed from a financial service center to the workshop of Red China. This rapid growth, combined with the gradual deterioration of the infrastructure and architectural grace of the former foreign concessions, made Shanghai look “provincial,” “vulgar,” and “uncultivated” to many of its nostalgic beholders throughout the 1980s. See Gao Ruxi and Yu Yihong, “Shanghai Economy: Stagnation and the Second Take-Off, 1953–1993” [“Shanghai jingji: tingzhi yu zai qifei, 1953–1993”], in Shanghai: Chengshi, shehui, yu wenhua [Shanghai: City, society, and culture], ed. Wang Hui and Yu Guoliang (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1998), 73–87.

14 “To be someone not from Shanghai (zuo waidi ren) is the most, most unfortunate lot assigned to people,” a teenage girl in Wang Anyi’s fiction thinks. See Wang Anyi, Changhenge [Ballad of eternal sorrow] (Beijing: Zuojiachubanshe, 1990), 276.

15 “Upper corner” (shangzhijiao) refers to the fashionable, expensive neighborhoods in the former French Concession in west Shanghai, whereas the “lower corner” means the lower- and working-class neighborhoods in the vast north, east, and south districts of the city. Before 1949 the rent of houses and apartments in the two corners could differ by as much as four to more than ten times. See Luo Xiaowei and Wu Jiang, eds., Shanghai Longtang (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1997), 6.


17 Built in 1934, the International Hotel was to stand as the tallest building in Shanghai (at 83.8 meters) for the next fifty years. But during the 1980s it symbolized the city’s stagnation. It disappeared into the massive, permanent construction site that Shanghai had become. By 1995 30 percent of the world’s cranes used in building high-rise hotels and office buildings were in Shanghai, according to architectural historian Anthony King in an unpublished paper.

18 Wang Weiming, Yuwang de chengshi [The city of desire] (Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe, 1990), 64. In 1990 a college graduate in Shanghai made about $250 a year based on the current exchange rate. The per capita living area in what was by far the most crowded city in China was some fifty square feet, or one-tenth the size of the bathroom in that presidential suite.

19 Ibid.

20 Wang, Ballad of Eternal Sorrow, 5. The translations are mine.
The natural-supernatural, Benjamin writes, “presents itself in the forest, in the animal kingdom, and by the surging sea; in any of those places the physiognomy of a big city can flash for a few moments” (Baudelaire, 60–61). The relationship between aesthetic forms and the urban experience in his comments on Impressionist painting is even more explicit: “The daily sight of a lively crowd may once have constituted a spectacle to which one’s eyes had to adapt first. . . . One may assume that once the eyes had mastered this task they welcomed opportunities to test their newly acquired faculties.” Thus Impressionist painting “would be a reflection of experiences with which the eyes of a big-city dweller have become familiar” (ibid., 130).


23 Max Pensky, Melancholy Dialectics (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 120.

24 See Luo and Wu, Shanghai Longtang. Although catering to foreign tourists, the book provides perhaps the best social, cultural, and architectural descriptions of the longtang. A “native” phenomenon shortly after Shanghai’s forced opening to the West, longtang houses “were native products of Shanghai soon after the city was forced open to the West as a treaty port.” While at first Chinese were excluded from the foreign concessions as residents, the British motivation to develop the city into a metropolis and the large number of wealthy Chinese refugees from the civil wars who requested residence in the foreign concessions together led to the colonial authorities agreeing to open those neighborhoods to the Chinese. To manage this influx, however, “large numbers of collective dwellings were built in designated lots of land enclosed by walls.” Combining English and Chinese elements (such as a front courtyard) and arranged in rows with sublanes, such housing became dominant throughout the city by the 1940s, when longtangs were home to nearly 3 million of the total population of 4.1894 million people (6; translation altered).

25 Pensky, Melancholy Dialectics, 57.

26 For example, “Gossip,” “The Pigeons” (“Gezi”), “Afternoon Tea” (“Xiawucha”), and “Death of the Old Beauty” (“Biluo huangquan”).

27 This is seen in the character and circle of Lao Kela (literally, old class, kela being a Shanghai Pidgin English word for class, in the sense of personal elegance; Wang Anyi mistakenly, I think, traces it to the word color). See Shanghai wenhua yuanlius cidian [A dictionary of sources of Shanghai culture] (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1992), app. 1, p. 725.
