

## Introducing Shanghai Modern: The Future in Microcosm?

Edited by Justin O'Connor & Xin Gu



When an awestruck Paris Hilton looked out over Shanghai's Pudong district in 2007 and said it looked 'like the future' she was not only airing a contemporary cliché but connecting with a longer history of the city as powerhouse of China's modernity. Shanghai is where modernity – the word, the concept, the reality - made landfall in China in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. By the 1940s it was a city comparable with any of the world's major metropolitan centres. Punished in consequence by the People's Republic after 1949, it remained China's industrial and sometimes political powerhouse - even if its culture, along with its built environment, remained preserved in the amber of neglect and poverty. Missing out on the first wave of Deng's reforms in the 1980s, Shanghai finally took off in the early 1990s with a speed and a skill that suggested long buried resources of entrepreneurial vision and global connections.

The city has been happy to trade on its glamorous global past as it made its way to becoming China's commercial capital, and its citizens constantly proclaim it to be the nation's 'most western city'. But what is the reality of this powerful narra-

tive? The city certainly has its fair share – and more – of the social costs of the global city: social and spatial fragmentation, poverty and displacement, the juxtaposition of the super-rich and the poor who service them. It is also surprisingly culturally cautious, with the avant-garde in ‘art’ and ‘popular culture’ located in ‘conservative’ Beijing. And its economy is driven more than in any other city by large state-owned enterprises belying its image as a free market entrepreneurial nirvana. It’s a party town, but not in the way Ms. Hilton might understand this.

The papers collected in this volume represent a range of different reflections on Shanghai past and present. Justin O’Connor’s article acts as introduction to the theme of *Shanghai Modern*, reviewing the way in which this has been used to construct a new historical narrative for Shanghai and China. It suggests that the opposition between revolutionary ‘closure’ and cosmopolitan openness is not so simple and hides many other oppositions which we might want to examine more closely.

Immediately after this introductory article we share Owen Hatherley’s “first encounter” with Shanghai (and China) and the challenges it presents to Western notions of modernity and the urban future. Organised as a series of walks this high speed *flaneurie* produces observational fragments and speculative reflections on the modern city which complement the author’s recent 2010 book *A Walk through the New ruins of Great Britain* (London: Verso).

Anna Greenspan is another western observer but also a long time resident of Shanghai. She takes us past first encounters to reflect not just on the nature of contemporary Shanghai but also on those notions of surface and depth in which such questions are inevitably caught. Many of the judgments of outsiders, she argues, trying to peek behind the curtain, misrecognise the role of appearance in traditional Chinese culture and which are still very much with us.

Hongwei Bao follows with a particular take on the question of cosmopolitanism, of insiders and outsiders, through a case study of queer spaces in Shanghai. In so doing he problematises the idea that gay spaces are an index of cosmopolitanism, or than that cosmopolitanism is necessarily equitable and tolerant.

Ma Ran and Lu Pan present us with case studies of official Shanghai memories, in the form of the Shanghai International film festival and the preservation of historical monuments in the city. Both testify to Abbas’ view that such memories are “select and fissured, sometimes indistinguishable from amnesia”.

Xin Gu and Sheng Zhong are concerned with the development of creative industries as a central to the cultural and economic aspirations of the new Shanghai. In particular they look at those “creative clusters” which combine theories of clustering and culture-led urban regeneration in an attempt to kick start a creative economy. Both papers look at how the historical built infrastructure is being used to engage with a new post-industrial future, and both raise questions about the ways in which this is being undertaken.

Haili Ma gives us an historical account of a form of cultural production mostly excluded from the glitzy world of the creative industries – Yue ju, a distinct form of Chinese opera from Shanghai. A unique development only possible in the autonomous urban milieu of the city, it used women-only performers to provide a new kind of entertainment suitable to the new urban consumer of Shanghai. After

being adopted by the Communist party and promoted after 1949 it has been severely challenged by the cutting of subsidy in the post-reform period. Haili charts the contradictions of a city promoting the form as a new elite entertainment when its audience is aging and lacks money, and the youthful experiments that might renew it are pushed to the margins.

Finally, Ian Fong Ho Yin takes us through a close reading of Wang Anyi's 1996 novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. It serves perhaps to close the various reflections on Shanghai Modern that began with the introduction by asking whether Shanghai past can any longer be of use to its future or if not lost, then the nostalgic trap it became for the heroine of that novel.

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