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Bourgeois Shanghai: Wang Anyi’s Novel of Nostalgia

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After the recent publication of a translation of Wang Anyi’s 1995 novel A Song of Everlasting Sorrow, we asked Howard Choy to reflect on the novel’s contents and importance. Below, Choy draws on his recently published work on late twentieth century Chinese fiction to contextualize Wang’s Shanghai story.

By Howard Y. F. Choy

Among all the major cities in China, Shanghai has become the most popular in recent academic research and creative writings. This is partly a consequence of its resuscitation under Deng Xiaoping’s (1904-1997) intensified economic reforms in the 1990s, and partly due to its unique experience during one hundred years (1843-1943) of colonization and the concomitant modernization that laid the foundation for the new Shanghai we see today. Many stories of Shanghai focus on the city’s prosperous history from the late Qing dynasty to the end of World War II, during which time the French Concession, the British-American International Settlement, and later the Japanese occupation dominated the treaty port. For instance, Leo Ou-fan Lee’s Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945 (1999) and Sherman Cochran’s Inventing Nanjing Road: Commercial Culture in Shanghai, 1900-1945 (1999) both conclude in 1945.
In this light, it is interesting to see that Wang Anyi begins her novel of Shanghai, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (Changhen ge, 1995), not in the flourishing 1930s, but in late 1945, when Japan had surrendered and the “Paris of the East” danced its last colonial tango before the communist liberation. Wang Anyi’s Shanghai affords entry to its residential lanes beyond the neon lights and at the end of nightly carnivals. Her Shanghai tale traces the changes of the city from pre-liberation times to the post-revolution days by following in the footsteps of a Miss Shanghai, as she walks along the longtang alleyways. It is her fellow townspeople’s humdrum existence under the rumbling state machine that concerns Wang. Clothing, food, shelter and transport—all basic aspects of everyday life—are depicted in such detail that a social history is created against the grain of the grand narrative of political history. Effeminated in the contours of qipao and the fragrances of perfumes, Wang’s Shanghai provides some counter-memories of communist China’s revolutionary history through her nostalgia for the colonial past fantasized in the capitalist present.

It seems that Wang Anyi was not the only one feeling nostalgic at the turn of the millennium. *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* was so well received in China that it won the prestigious Mao Dun Literature Award in 2000. It was then presented on the stage by the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center in 2004, cinematized by Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan in 2005, adapted for TV by Ding Hei in 2006, and recently translated into English by Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). With this canonical work, Wang Anyi once again proves herself as a major figure in the scene of contemporary Chinese literature.

Spanning forty odd years from 1945 to 1986, the novel is tripartite. Book I is set in the glittery city of Shanghai during the latter half of the 1940s. Wang Qiya, a glamorous girl from a lowly family who dreamed of becoming a movie star in her school days, takes third place in the first Miss Shanghai beauty contest after the war. She is then kept as a mistress by a politician, who is unfortun
ately killed in a plane crash in 1948. In Book II she retreats to the countryside and soon returns as a neighborhood nurse to the fallen city in the 1950s. Associating with three men—a profligate son of the rich, a half-Russian loafer, and a photographer—she gives birth to a girl out of wedlock in 1961. Largely skipping the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Book III covers the decade after the political turmoil. The protagonist spends a simple life with her daughter and young admirers in the reviving city until her daughter gets married and leaves for the United States. With its thinly veiled allusions to Lady Yang Yuhuan’s (719-755) demise romanticized in Bo Juyi’s (772-846) oft-quoted poem “The Song of Everlasting Sorrow,” the story ends with Wang Qiyao’s violent death while protecting a box of gold bars left to her by the politician. The last thing she sees on her deathbed is the mise en scène of a bedroom murder that she watched forty years ago in a film studio. Miss Shanghai Wang Qiyao’s declining life from youth to old age can be understood synecdochically as Shanghai’s vicissitudes from the postwar to the post-revolutionary periods.

Writing Shanghai women and writing Shanghai through women have a long tradition in modern Chinese fiction. Cao Juren’s (1903-1972) literary comment has characterized the urban styles in terms of the female sex: “The Peking school (Jingpai) is like a boudoir-bound lady, whereas the Shanghai school (Haipai) is like a modern girl.” The lyrical writing of the romantic and the nostalgic has distinguished the Shanghai style from the didactic Peking style. Uncomplicated as the storyline appears, the novel is nearly four hundred pages long, because the author devotes her energy to nuances of the physical and psychological worlds instead of to an intricate plot. The prolonged descriptions in The Song of Everlasting Sorrow are redolent of the nineteenth-century romanticist Victor Hugo and naturalist Émile Zola. Its meticulous writing points ironically to the futility of life, resonating with Cao Xueqin’s (1715-1763) classic Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng), in which the once prosperous Prospect Garden falls into a lost paradise. The close attention to every bit of life as well as subtle emotional changes is enhanced by feminine sensibility. Like Cao Xueqin and Eileen Chang, Wang Anyi is good at in-depth depiction of the female psychology.

The Song of Everlasting Sorrow starts with a five-page section describing old Shanghai’s longtang alleys. From a bird’s-eye view of the city, postwar Shanghai is read as a negative print: while the lights form punctuation and lines, the massive alleyways are the darkness behind them. It is not at night, but at daybreak when the narrator enters into the particulars of various classes of the longtang, making a
tour from the stone-gate houses (shikumen) to shanty towns (penghu). Roofing tiles and roofing felt, roof ridge and roof dormer (laohuchuang), window frame and windowsill, wooden staircase and wooden partition, street lamp and street door, rear window and back door, iron gate and cement floor, wing-room and pavilion room (tingzijian), courtyard and parlor, kitchen and boudoir, terrace and balcony, gable and sewer—the domestic architecture is presented with the utmost exactitude as in a traditional Chinese realistic painting.

After this intimate invitation into the heart of the city, the reader is saddened to see that Shanghai is no longer the same city when its street names are decolonized and revolutionized. Thirty years after the liberation, the alleys are beaten-up, both the Huangpu River and Suzhou River are badly polluted, and the trams whose clanging bells sounded like the city’s heartbeat have disappeared. The mechanical dingdong sound made by the tolling of a bell on the tram is frequently mentioned to invoke a nostalgic mood in the novel. After decades of suppression of material desires, in the first chapter of Book III we revisit the longtang and the houses connected by them—again under the author’s descriptive guidance. While the apartment complexes’ carved Romanesque designs have gathered dust and cobwebs, the Western-style houses’ semicircular balconies are divided into two kitchens by the families residing in them. Gone are the splendor of all architectural adornments and the exquisiteness of the metropolis. Echoing her city-text simile at the outset of the novel, the author laments that the cityscape has become chaotic and unreadable, even though the old street names are now restored.

It is precisely because of Wang Anyi’s focus on the cramped longtang, instead of the bustling Bund, as a sublime spectacle that Chinese critics read the novel as a postsocialist nostalgia of bourgeois Shanghai, hence the first example of an emerging middle-class literature in post-Mao China. The telos of proletarian revolution in twentieth-century Chinese literature is undercut by everyday concerns of the urban petty bourgeoisie in Wang’s writing. The changing Shanghai lane-scape has accumulated a history, but the marginal culture of the longtang precludes *grande histoire*. The trivial matters of everyday banality in alleyways reveal Shanghai people’s apolitical and ahistorical attitude toward life. This philosophy of life prevails against the agenda of communist revolution. Mainland critic Zhang Qinghua thus concludes: ”’Revolutionary Shanghai’ seems never to be able to beat the ‘urban petty bourgeois Shanghai’—revolution and politics stand above the roofs of Shanghai, but the daily life of the urban petty bourgeois is deep-seated in every alley and corner” (Dangdai zuojia pin glun, 2003, no. 2: 86).

Wang Qiyao is neither an all-conquering hero of the times nor a classical tragic hero against fate but, if I can be oxymoronic, a hero of everyday life. The quotidian ‘hero’ knows best how to lead the urban life under all circumstances. Such heroism lies in the self’s immersion in the struggle for a livable life and material amenities. The materiality of the mundane world that Wang demonstrates is the city dwellers’ device to distance themselves from state ideology. Of the basic necessities of life, clothing—read ‘fashion’—is what Wang Qiyao hankers after. Pages of graphic details are given over to discussions and descriptions of her dress styles for the Miss Shanghai pageant. Concerning people’s bodily relation to their garments, Eileen Chang has pointed out the politics in her 1943 essay “Chinese Life and Fashions”: ”In an age of political disorder, people were powerless to modify existing conditions closer to their ideal. All they could do was to create their own atmosphere, with clothes, which constitute for most men and all women their immediate environments
We live in our clothes.” The space created by fashion on the body counteracts the sartorial practice of the Cultural Revolution, when personal style and Western dresses were considered to be bourgeois. The clothing space as the closest space next to the skin is the ultimate space that one should defend.

The politics of apparel lies in the wearer’s retreat into the textile space, where the immediacy of attire allows the most direct expression of personal taste in times of prosperity and minimal comfort of the corporeal self in periods of turmoil. Following the change of regime in 1949, the 1950s lost city of Shanghai witnesses the replacement of Western-style men’s suits by modified Sun Yat-sen suits (Zhongshan zhuang) and the gradual disappearance of the once fashionable Manchu banner gowns (qipao), whose modern version, cheongsam, has become more fitted and waisted to reveal the contours of the female body since the 1920s and 1930s. The Cultural Revolution is marked by its anti-fashion trend under the dominance of uniform blue cotton clothes. After the revolution, while her daughter and other young fashionists embrace the brave new world of street fashion, Wang Qiyao, seeing the origin of new fashions in the old styles, welcomes it as a reminder of her bourgeois experience in the bygone days.

The tedious descriptions of day-to-day bourgeois experience in Wang Anyi’s nostalgic novel of Shanghai are commensurable to the trivial round of daily life in the real world. Here the everydayness of urban middle-class life has dissolved the greatness of political grandiloquence. For Wang Anyi, history is not to be redeemed from major political events, but from minor personal matters, which the author often likens to leftover pieces of fabric. She sees history in private life, in its smallest trifles. Trifles are worth ruminating upon because they are the bits of the past that one was able to control (e.g., choice of one’s clothing—at least its size and degree of cleanliness), is able to re-create (according to one’s nostalgic desires), and will be able to engage (in one’s daily routine). And this minimal freedom of the individual can be materialized only through the petty bourgeois practices in a consumer city such as Shanghai.

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