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A House Museum Café: Part 2

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Shanghainese, coffee and the generational divide

As I chat with the librarian-cum-barista, a Shanghainese family comes in and starts looking over the menu. They order three different kinds of imported coffee and as the librarian lights the flame percolator, I ask her whether there are differences between Shanghainese visitors and those from other areas of China.

“The Shanghainese are more inclined to talk. I can tell the non-Shanghainese by the way they walk, and their silence. When I recommend books to them from the gift shop, they don't respond. When they leave and I say goodbye, they don’t even turn to look at me and I feel silly. And of course, only the Shanghainese drink coffee.”

Which Shanghainese drink coffee?

“Oh, the older ones.” The father of the coffee-drinking family joins the conversation: “Only the older generation likes coffee. The children won’t drink it.” Kids these days! “The older generation likes to drink coffee, sit, and enjoy a pleasant atmosphere.” Indeed, this family walked in the door just half an hour before closing time, and the librarian was nervous that they wouldn’t have time to finish. They had assured her they’d simply “drink one cup and go.” But they are still there, relaxing, drinking in the 40 million yuan décor forty-five minutes later. When the librarian offers the family water after they’ve finished their coffee, they refuse: “No, we’re just enjoying the flavor.” The father asks why the café is silent: “Coffee shops should have music!” The librarian replies enthusiastically that she used to use saxophone music before she was asked to stop by the House Museum management—when she played music the atmosphere was not “serious” enough. Back before she was asked to stop, she had originally been looking for 1930s saxophone jazz before giving up and choosing contemporary saxophone over 1930s piano—the piano would have been authentic, but the saxophone was relaxing.

So what, then, does the younger generation drink?

The father and the librarian agree: the youth won’t drink coffee like their parents; they like fruit drinks and pearl milk tea. Tea! It’s no surprise that only the young like the wide-straw drinks with three different types of chewy things floating in them, but what is surprising, when set against the backdrop of the rest of China, is that the middle-aged have latched onto coffee while the youngsters slurp tea-based drinks. It’s the opposite of the rest of China. And it only holds together through a certain kind of misremembering.

The volunteers, percolating librarian and Shanghainese visitors in the Liu Changsheng House tell a story of coffee in Shanghai that is unfamiliar and not altogether accurate. The revolutionaries drank coffee during secret meetings during the underground days, Aileen Chang and Lu Xun enjoyed coffee as they wrote, and now it’s only the older generation that appreciate it—the youth have moved on to sweeter, more colorful drinks. What’s wrong with this story? Somewhere, the socialist period fell out of the picture. Like the House Museum visitor who walks through the history exhibit toward the inexorable red lanterns of 1949 and then finds herself in a blank staircase before emerging back into the year 2010 on the street below, the narrative of coffee in Shanghai is missing a few decades.

Think back to the beautiful women writers (meinu zuojia) of the 1990s. For the incorrigible Wei Hui, author of Shanghai Baby, coffee was a living and a way of life—even after her protagonist quits her job at a coffee shop, she continues to meet other young, artsy types for coffee. The apartment she shares with her boyfriend is transgressively empty of the means of reproduction—no marriage, no children, no food or tea—only a few spoonfuls of coffee in the kitchen. And to the self-involved author of Candy, Mian Mian, coffee runs in the veins of the beautiful, the young, the tragic, the homosexual and the artist: “In those days [1989] hardly anyone drank coffee, and drinking coffee was very hip and poetic.” Wei Hui tells us that this group of disaffected youth is the “linglei,” damned as trash,
sometimes imitated, and often insulted for their lifestyle choices. A few years earlier, songs such as Teresa Teng’s “Wine and Coffee” (Meijiu Jia Kafei) that reassured mainland listeners that focus on the self rather than the collective was alright (see Thomas B. Gold, or Jia Zhangke quoted in Kin-Yan Szeto), were very unsuccessfully banned. There was a time when China, indeed Shanghai, was painfully outgrowing its Mao jacket, a time when coffee was edgy and foreign. Jeff Wasserstrom reminds us that Starbucks was billed as foreign, even “European,” upon its entry into China.

But today in the museum café, that time seems to be forgotten. The Shanghainese family enjoys the aftertaste of coffee brewed by a librarian in a 1930s themed café, sitting underneath two floors of exhibits of CCP underground history. They’re the picture of reserved middle-class refinement. Tea-based drinks are what you drink on heady Shanghainese Friday nights when you window shop with your twenty-something friends. Coffee is what you drink with your parents. Could coffee be the Shanghainese tea?

**Coffee at the heart of Communist history?**

“Xiaozi!” “Little capitalist!” my friend chides me, when I comment that I like to write my field notes in a tea shop near my apartment in Shanghai’s Jing’an District, that they make a nice cup of coffee there. “But that’s ok,” she laughs, “The rest of China thinks that all Shanghainese are xiaozi, and you’re here now.”

Arriving in Shanghai for my first stay longer than just a few days, I noticed Shanghai’s coffee habit right away. Little capitalists or not, the Shanghainese do seem to like their coffee. The prevalence of coffee shops, compared with my sometime-homes Beijing and Guangzhou, is striking. I once took a two-block walk around my neighborhood and counted five.

Mao famously didn’t care much for the Shanghainese or their revolutionary credentials, and the image of the Shanghainese as coffee-drinking little capitalists seems consistent with this view. But the Liu Changsheng House Museum in Jing-an District tells a different story. (I introduced the Liu Changsheng House Museum in Part 1 of this article.) It’s a House Museum where Party activists allegedly met to plan the Revolution during the years the CCP operated underground. The upper two floors are museum exhibits that track the communist movement in Shanghai from the 1920s to 1949. An old coffee shop purportedly frequented by Eileen Chang relocated from its original location a couple of blocks away to the bottom floor of the house, and here visitors can enjoy a cup of coffee in a 1930s Shanghai atmosphere.

If coffee is the drink of the Shanghai xiaozi, what is it doing in a museum of CCP history? How has it wriggled its way into the hallowed revolutionary narrative? Or was it, rather, wrenched out of its rightful place in that narrative, only to be restored now?

The museum volunteers assure me that Lu Xun, ever the saintly progressive, drank coffee. Not in the café that moved into the ground floor of the museum, but somewhere. And coffee was the refreshment served at underground Party meetings in this house. It is my shock in discovering coffee in this space of communist orthodoxy that elicits these explanations, and their haste in defending coffee as Lu Xun’s drink of choice and in insisting on the image of coffee mugs sitting in the shadow of the illicit woodblock printers, which belies the natural place they claim for coffee in the Revolution.

Coffee is usually mobilized to different ends in China. It’s the drink of the xiaozi, of the linglei transgressive youth in the 1980s and 1990s, or of the Shanghainese older generation who sit, chat, and enjoy the flavor. Maura Cunningham points out that it can be the drink of the internationalized, cosmopolitan set, whether or not they actually enjoy the flavor. Communist revolutionaries are yet one more category in this list of irreducible types.

Coffee is a chameleon symbol, mobilized to stand in for whichever category requires representation at a given moment. It serves different purposes based on the needs of whoever invokes it. In the Liu Changsheng House Museum, coffee’s representation of the Revolution does a certain kind of work for
the managers of cultural heritage—it legitimates the assembly of three historically significant places—a house, a jail and a café—into one building.

Concluding her labor-intensive percolating and rinsing out the many movable parts of the coffee-making apparatus, the librarian who works in the café tells me that sometimes visiting Party dignitaries are brought here to see the exhibit and then attend an event held in their honor in the café. In a house museum relocated a block down the street to make way for a mall, housing a displaced coffee shop and the last relics of a jail in whose original location a school now stands, maybe they’re toasting Shanghai’s success in development. With coffee.

Did coffee fuel the communist-backed uprisings of the 1920s?

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