

# The Birth, Rupture, and Death of Literary Shanghai

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Modern Chinese literature was born at the same time as the city of Shanghai, and the two grew up hand-in-hand through the romantic period of cosmopolitanism during Shanghai's Republican era, through the city's fall from grace as the "hideous beauty" of the nation's ideological era, and through a rebirth of both the city and Chinese literature, only to perhaps be forever lost in the city's transformation into the capital of the global marketplace.

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From the very way it is made and disseminated, "modern literature" implies an industrial product that is printed en-masse on paper in order to reach its market. In today's world it is still highly necessary to specify such features upfront. By doing so we not only can draw a distinct line between classical literature and modern literature according to their forms, but we can also shed some light on the current situation faced by modern literature (Though "contemporary" literature has now entered the age when neither print nor paper is needed, the history of the printed page has yet to be concluded.).

Therefore, when looking at the intersection of literary history and its associated spaces (geographically), if our definition of literature consists entirely of a printed, paper-based product, then since the mid-nineteenth century, only Shanghai literature has departed from this traditional definition in terms of how it is written and how it is disseminated. Only in Shanghai could such a transformation take place. In other words, modern literature and the city of Shanghai were born at the same time and grew up hand-in-hand.

With regard to the literature of the actual city of Shanghai and the Shanghai of literary imagination, we need to speak in numbers, which will offer evidence that Shanghai is (at least to a certain extent) the birthplace of modern Chinese literature.

These numbers refer to the volume of newspapers and periodicals printed in China by modern paper-based presses from the early nineteenth century. Geographically speaking, Shanghai had far more newspapers and periodicals than any other place in China. According to the *Directory of Modern Chinese Newspapers and Periodicals* (Fujian People's Press, 1991), from the 1850s until 1911, the number of newspapers and periodicals published in Shanghai was approximately

460. In comparison, Beijing during the same period only produced around 160. Furthermore, almost all key contemporary literary presses were in Shanghai, such as *Fiction Illustrated* (1903), *The New Novel* (1904), *Novel World* (1905), *Monthly Fiction* (1906), *Novel Forest* (1907), *Short Story Monthly* (1910), and so on. Shanghai also housed a number of newspapers in which many important and influential literary works were first published. These newspapers either specialized in social, political, or general news, such as *Shanghai News* (1872), *Su Newspaper* (1896), *Current Affairs Newspaper* (1896), *Journal of the East* (1904), *Shenzhou Daily* (1907), *The China Times* (1911), or specialized in art and entertainment, such as *Dianshizhai Pictorial* (1884), *News Pictorial* (1908), *Min Li Pictorial* (1911), and so on. All these printed media transformed Shanghai not only into a paradise for newspapers and periodicals, but also an active market teeming with literary productions and a vibrant culture industry. The effect of this unique commercial circumstance was further supported by various political forces, the most developed civil society in China, an established civil culture, and China's highest living standards. Literary imagination seemed to flow from every pore of Shanghai, a city that turned out to dwell within the literary imagination as well.

In such a space and time, it is perhaps not strange at all to see the birth and prevalence of entertainment and romance novels that focused mainly on metropolitan life. Indeed, such a development may well be inevitable. Yet the so-called Shanghai School (or the Shanghai School of Literature) established during this time also refers more generally to Shanghai culture, and therefore, remains elusive and controversial. What exactly falls under the domain of the Shanghai School of Literature versus what belongs to more general Shanghai culture is always at the center of this debate; things were made more confusing still as the phrase

“Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School of Literature,” referring to the most famous branch of the Shanghai School, is often used to refer to the Shanghai School though they are not identical.

In general, the Butterfly School can—literarily speaking—be characterized as being both commercial and romantically tainted. “Commercial” insofar as the Butterfly School typically produces the most market-oriented literature in China, often publishing works in installments. “Romantically tainted” refers to its erotic nature, which is not necessarily pornographic. Yet clearly its primary commercial asset is its focus on relationships between men and women. Its commercial and romantic elements make the Butterfly School incompatible with traditional elite literature and its grand narratives, influenced as they were by China’s great poetry tradition, and the Butterfly School does not contain an ounce of the political narrative or of war literature or socialist literature that became mainstream in the late 1940s through the ’70s. These commercial and romantic elements were not only characteristics of the Butterfly School or the Shanghai School but were also embedded in the literary identity of the city of Shanghai. After playing a short-lived leading role in the Republican era of the 1930s and ’40s, the Butterfly School withered, and its revival would not occur until the end of the twentieth century. Thanks to economic reforms, political (opening) reforms, and the encouragement of a well-developed media, this market-oriented literature regained its momentum as China once again began to embrace a new era of commercial culture.

However, the difference between these two heydays is obvious: the original Butterfly School echoed tastes of the old scholars by indulging in “feudal” sentiments and lifestyles, while the market-oriented writing of the 1990s featured distinctive contemporary elements—politics, business competition, technology, and fantasy, all of which lay beyond the reach of the original Butterfly School writers. Interestingly, the only thing that remained unaltered after a century is Shanghai itself, or to be more exact the idea of Shanghai. This can be clearly seen in the literature of the 1990s when both commercial and romantic writing became popular again. In these works, nostalgia—especially the nostalgia for the Shanghai of the 1930s and ’40s in the Republican era—recreated the city in literature and used it as an altar for worship, generating stronger doses of nostalgia. At that time, literary works about Shanghai became fashionable: Shanghai was carved out of the clouds of history and covered in heavy stage makeup, so its image remained hazy at best. Shanghai still has the power to arouse readers’ imagination and passions. Even revisiting the

concept of the Shanghai School has been met with excitement.

Literary Shanghai is not all romance, however; it has also had darker days. Heydays are followed by declines. This is a natural law and nothing is exempt. As the new literary movement at Peking University rose to national prominence in Mao’s China, Shanghai’s presses and newspapers lost their dominant role in deciding which literary trend to promote and adore. The Northern Government in Beijing had by this time claimed the right to direct cultural discourses, as with the case of Peking University. An influx of European ideas gathered force in universities, and a new generation of intellectuals began to replace the cultural brokers within earlier traditional intellectual circles. Moreover, the new cultural regimes regarded “old literature” as a sworn enemy. These changes did not greatly affect the history until the appearance of *Novel Monthly*, a popular literary journal, received new owners and a new aesthetic regime, which marked a new era in both the literary capital of China and commercial literature. From then on, literary Shanghai was torn asunder. And only a century after its birth in Shanghai, it has returned home. In other words, no matter what clothing it wears, literary Shanghai (even today) remains tainted by romance and commercialism.

Popular literature—as dictated by the tastes of the general public—has remained heavily influenced by Westernized literature, which triumphed time and again. Westernized literature takes modern Europe and the United States as its model, incorporating Enlightenment ideas of freedom, revolution, left-wing politics, and so on. Yet Westernized literature itself was heterogeneous in nature. But in the end, it was the fact that Shanghai was a monster of modern civilization, the capitalistic black hole seen to be pulling everything, including morals, into its abyss. In reading the so-called neo-perceptionist novel *Midnight*, we can witness the harsh argument between the Beijing School and the Shanghai School. Shanghai was a hotbed of revolutions, a battlefield of the labor movement, the birthplace of a new civilization. In this environment, a new literature of “revolution-plus-love” developed, as seen in the novel *Short-Pants Party* and the Left-Wing Association. Of course one must remember that Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese literature, also lived in Shanghai and died there. As a matter of fact, the literary Shanghai was torn apart and remained so until the 1980s. It is easy to understand. The civil war that raged in the mid-1930s between the Nationalists and Communists tore China apart, Shanghai in particular. The so-called school of Isolated Island Literature<sup>1</sup> served as the best evidence of this unprecedented event.

After 1949 the people's literature began its period of domination, and Shanghai truly became the "Flower of Evil," as it was the capital of bourgeois values and culture and had to be hidden from the proletariat so that they would not stumble upon its "hideous beauty," which would erode their working-class ideology and beliefs. Thus, "Shanghai the Evil" and "Shanghai the Beautiful" became the two dominant stereotypes of the literary imagination. The film *Sentinels Under the Neon Lights* was not the only high-profile attempt to paint Shanghai as "the capital of evil." The model opera *Harbor* produced during the Cultural Revolution was marked by this stereotype of beauty and evil. Shanghai's evil was born from her beauty, and her beauty was a manifestation of Shanghai's evil, which hid under the cover of this beauty. This cultural logic and ideological language have informed nearly all the ways Shanghai has been recreated in the literary imagination. Shanghai's literary position mirrors the tides of China's ideological landscape as well as the construction and deconstruction of values, as the 1990s again inverted the evil/beauty dichotomy to see Shanghai as beautiful once more.

Who created the most unique vision of literary Shanghai in the 1990s? If only one candidate could be nominated, I will vote for Wei Hui, the author of *Shanghai Baby*. No other writer can transform what was once Shanghai the Evil into something completely new, something that is fashionable, unique, and distinctively Shanghai. Saying so neither overdramatizes Wei Hui's literature nor overexaggerates her ingenuity, as one might say about a "Sister Rurong" Internet sensation that proves society's hunger for the newest, latest trends, which all guarantee the further metamorphosis of Shanghai's commercial culture. The fashion industry was born and transformed in Shanghai when the city's economy began to take off. Although Shanghai is not the only city loved by the marketplace, it has unique strengths because of its strong fashion and cultural industries, and a geographic advantage unparalleled by any other city in China. The market is not the maker, but rather the force behind the Shanghai fashion industry. As a result, commercially driven and romantically tainted literature has resurfaced, and after its presence became known, the Shanghai in Wei Hui's novels fell out of fashion once she no longer appealed to nostalgic or postmodern tastes. The shoulders of these young writers born after the 1970s can hardly carry Shanghai's history, which is far older. Consequently, Chen Danyan, Susu, and, of course, Wang Anyi, among others, became the spokespersons of literary Shanghai. When Shanghai and the world converged in the 1990s, literature by the post-'80s generation had surpassed the popularity of literature by the post-'70s generation,

and it was at this time when Shanghai disappeared for good.

The reason why literary Shanghai can still exist and function as a cultural marker is partially because of the commonalities between it as a city and urban life more generally, and its urban culture, especially its cultural productivity. Shanghai's unique geographic location, and its civil and social life are also key factors. In this sense, any homogenization would kill the Shanghai imagination. Sadly, Shanghai had already started its journey toward globalization. Among other global cities, Shanghai is a latecomer who now can no longer shake off the economic consequences of globalization, namely, cultural homogenization. The city already has become a model of homogenization. Moreover, the Internet and other technology introduced the virtual world that has partially replaced the real, physical community. Shanghai's literary imagination now is almost redundant. As a result, pidgin English, a taste for Western culture, and the lifestyle of Westernized young men, together with all linguistic and physical vestiges of the Westernized civic life, now become living fossils to testify to the capability of Shanghai's culture to recreate and regenerate itself.

When all these disappear, the unique sense of the literary and cultural Shanghai also will be gone. Literary Shanghai will certainly be the first to fall. Whereas the remnants of a cultural Shanghai can still be found on a broad scale in memories and physical items, the elements of literary Shanghai—both textual and verbal—will evaporate without a trace. Elementary students in 2010 can no longer speak the Shanghai dialect. The nostalgia for the 1990s is nothing but childish tricks in the eyes of contemporary writers, who earn their reputations by writing about time traveling and tomb raiding. Therefore, if there are still people who want to discuss the Shanghai School of Literature, such an attempt is tantamount to daydreaming and nonsense. Only the name "Shanghai" has survived; the rest is lost to history. Compared to spatial ruptures many years ago, today we face ruptures in the temporal dimension. Ruptures that are tantamount to death itself. Literary Shanghai needs to be revived from the heart and reorganized from the ground up. ○

*Translated by Yongan Wu*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note:* After Shanghai was occupied by Japan in November 1937, the writers living in the special section of the city known as the "isolated island," Shanghai's foreign concession area, continued to write there under this name.

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