

## Shanghai Modern: Replaying Futures Past

By Justin O'Connor

### Abstract

This article discusses different accounts of *Shanghai Modern*, the period between 1920s and 1940s in which the city occupied a unique position within China and the world. It places discussions of this period in the context of the resurgence of urban led modernization in China, led by Shanghai. It looks in particular at Leo Ou-Fan Lee's attempt to link the cosmopolitanism of Shanghai modern with prospects for this new post-reform China. I then discuss Ackbas Abbas' response to this book and use this as a way of reflecting on the progress of Shanghai urban development and its divergence/ convergence with similar processes in the West. The article then looks at the other significant moment of the Cultural Revolution as a way of opening up discussions of Chinese and Shanghainese modernity beyond that of simply an absorption into Western capitalist modernity. It concludes by briefly introducing this volume.

**Keywords:** Shanghai; modernity; modernism; urban development; Post-reform China.

## I

*When Shanghai fell in 1949 to the Chinese communists a door was shut. During the cultural revolution the door was bolted for good. A world had gone...[C]ommunism has fallen on the city like a sandstorm, burying and preserving.... Communism has mummified Shanghai's appearance in a manner inconceivable to a Westerner. Shopping centres, over-passes and subways are all missing. So, despite carefully preserved wrappings, is Shanghai's spirit. ... To write about a spiritually dead city presents difficulties. (Sergeant, Shanghai, 1991: 5-6)*

*After years of stagnation, the great metropolis of SHANGHAI is undergoing one of the fastest economic expansions the world has ever seen. The skyline is filling with skyscrapers; there are three thousand now, more than New York, and another two thousand are coming soon. Gleaming shopping malls, luxurious hotels and prestigious arts centres are rising alongside. Shanghai's 21 million residents enjoy the highest incomes on the mainland, and there's plenty for them to splash out on; witness the rash of celebrity restaurants and designer flagship stores. In short, it's a city with a swagger, bursting with nouveau riche exuberance and élan. (Rough Guide on-line 2011)*

On the surface these two quotes stage a fairly straight-forward narrative of a progression from Communist stagnation, closure to the world, and spiritual death to growth, openness and the recovery of exuberance and *élan*. It is a narrative that has set the tone for many western commentators who began to take an increasing interest in China generally from the mid-1990s, accelerating rapidly after the turn of the millennium. In the 1990s it was South China that drew western attention; in Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta an energetic entrepreneurialism reminiscent of early industrial Manchester was transforming the landscape of communist state-owned enterprises into a new “workshop of the world”, red in tooth and claw. In the post-1989 world this *Manchesterism* could only be welcome, and much more so than the gangster capitalism that was emerging in the various fragments of the Soviet Union.

But already for observers on the ground, the transformation was becoming more than a return to the capitalist fold. This was not primarily a question of whether China's capitalism was a “real” capitalism, or when (if at all) it would develop liberal democratic political forms. It was the speed and scale of its urban transformation that was somehow shocking, even monstrous. Through books such as Rem Koolhaas' *The Great Leap Forward* – which built on his other Harvard-Based projects of the later 1990s such as *S,M,L,XL* – western readers encountered not just a re-run of western urban modernisation but some new kind of city-region, on a scale which urban planners in the west could scarcely conceive. Heroic modernism, demonised in the West since the early 1970s, had in many ways already migrated to Asian cities through the work of “starchitects” Norman Foster, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers (Foster 2010). The radical vision of a revived (or indeed, “retroactive”) modernism articulated by Koolhaas in *Delirious New York* (1974) now seemed more at home in Asia, and especially China, than in Manhattan (see Owen Hatherley in this volume).

New visitors to China from the late 1990s onwards experienced a first encounter with a new kind of future. For those who read the numbers properly – and in the boom years of the 1990s there were few who could see past the liberal democratic *End of History* – it was clear that if China’s growth continued in this way then this could not be simply a quirky regional variety of capitalist modernization. However its development turned out its sheer mass was going to have profound consequences on every global indicator you could care to mention – from economic to environmental to geo-political.

Fukuyama’s now notorious *The End of History* (1992) proclaimed the ultimate triumph of capitalist liberal democracy at the same time as it suggested that the future could only be more of the same. It coincided with Frederick Jameson’s “postmodern moment”, in which the horizon of global capitalism stretched out in all directions, obliterating the idea of a different future and indeed temporality as such (Jameson 1991). Commentators constantly invoked Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner* to describe the neon-lit skyline of the new Asian cities; but this dystopian, futureless urban future, with its synthesized, manipulated individual and collective pasts (visible in the *retro-noir* form itself) is clearly Los Angeles. The comparison misses what Chinese cities of the 1990s exuded: an optimistic future of growth, technology and general material improvement long since abandoned in the West. Visitors encountered a kind of modernization process which our “post-materialism” had seemingly surpassed and they found a charge of energy and optimism – even libido – which could only bring on nostalgia for the West’s earlier naïve belief in progress; that the future could only get better.

Fukuyama’s title refers to Hegel’s lectures on world history in the later 1820s. These have been taken as a definitive moment when Asia – despotic, luxurious, cruel, vital, vast – was consigned to a pre-modern past. Whereas in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain could conceive of Imperial China on equal terms (not reciprocated), a decade after Hegel’s lectures a few gun boats brought the archaic empire to heel. Underneath the dominant narrative of China – finally acknowledging its communist dead-end and launching a rapid catch-up that must inevitably lead to its normalization – another version of this re-run could be discerned. For those with eyes to see, the future first encountered in South China was monstrous – and intoxicating – not just because of its outsized re-run of naïve promethean modernization; here the future was just beginning and it was no longer necessarily ours. Fukiyama’s end of history moment paradoxically marked the definitive passage of Hegel’s West into the past.

## II

Shenzhen, the *wunderkind* of Chinese modernization, was a village-cum-workshop-of-the-world. The green light given to Shanghai’s development in 1992 by Deng Xiaoping irrecoverably changed the dynamics of urban development in

China. Shanghai had been an economic powerhouse throughout the Communist era but having to donate 80 percent of its income to the national government meant its urban infrastructure received very little investment. Hence the state of the city described by Hilary Sergeant above as “mummified”. Reviving this mummy, as in the Hollywood films, was always going to be an uncertain process. The scenario outlined above is one where Shanghai would pick up where it left off in the 1930s. The entrepreneurial spirit and economic know-how of the city, its connections with overseas Chinese capital, its established – if dilapidated – urban infrastructure would, now that it was given its chance, propel the city into the forefront of the economic reform process. Which it duly did. Driven forward by the municipal leadership – soon to be national – of Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji Shanghai embarked on that rapid process of urban development which stands as background to the papers in this volume (Chen 2009).

“Picking up where it left off” meant something different for a Chinese Communist Party (CPC) leadership engaged in the post-1978 reform process. This renewed spurt of modernization could never be the repudiation of the revolution to which it was assigned by many western writers. Its initial justification was the rejection, not of Communism, but its ultra-left excesses during the Cultural Revolution. It was a picking up of the debates around the role of the market and foreign trade during the heroic modernization process of the 1950s and early 1960s – but now with the examples of the Asian tigers striding into the distance and in a new, unpredictable context of “globalization”. The astonishing development of Pudong begun in the mid-1990s, with its cluster of huge skyscrapers in the “Tomorrow Square” of Lujiazui, was meant as a surpassing of the colonial buildings on The Bund in Puxi. The new Shanghai would no longer be in the shadow of its imperialist capitalist past; the earlier phase of modernization which had built the city into “the Paris (or New York) of the East” would be dwarfed by new forces propelling the shiny metropolis skywards from the rice fields.

Nevertheless, the emergence of Shanghai at the forefront of this modernization opened up some particularly deep and complex fissures in this post-reform narrative. The revival of Shanghai was an acknowledgment of the primary power of urban modernization after thirty years of rural-led development. Shanghai had been the site of the foundation of the CPC and of the early workers struggles against both capitalism and imperialism. After their 1927 suppression in the city by Chiang Kai-shek the main Communist forces had moved to the countryside and eventually, in Mao’s famous formulation, “surrounded the cities”.

History has dealt its most ironic coup de grace by making the cities [Hong Kong and Shanghai] important once again as cultural and commercial centers after half a century of rural revolution promoting the triumph of the countryside over the cities. As a century of China’s search for modernity comes to an end, the specters that hang over the not too distant horizon are cities such as Shanghai and Hong Kong. (Lee 1999: 339)

This was more than a switch of economic policy – though the consequences of this were to be profound (and deeply mixed) for both urbanites and rural workers. For in the historiography of the People’s Republic Shanghai had not just been China’s foremost site of modernization but also of its capitalist and imperialist degradation. The liberation of Shanghai in 1949 was presented by the Communists as a victory not just over a key imperialist foothold but a definitive rebuttal of a western capitalist model of modernization and of the urban modernity to which it had given rise. Shanghai represented cosmopolitan decadence and exploitation, a city of workers, prostitutes and beggars lorded over by foreign and Chinese comprador capitalists. The victorious arrival of the ragged, peasant Red Army down the *Huai Hai* road was an act of repudiation and cleansing. The high level of contribution required from Shanghai by the national government was as much punitive as it was necessary; the city was to pay for its sins by financing the modernisation of the rest of China.

Did the return of Shanghai signify more than the return of the market and a renewed emphasis on urban development? Deng Xiaoping’s reforms were also based on an “opening up” which many students and intellectuals wished to extend from inward investment and foreign trade to the promise of greater cultural and democratic freedoms. The events of June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 put an end to this easy assumption at the national level; but did the re-launch of the reforms in 1992 and the re-emergence of Shanghai signify the resumption of an older urban modernity in which this “openness” might thrive anew?

### III

This seems to me the significance of Leo Ou-Fan Lee’s influential 1999 book *Shanghai Modern* which attempted to establish a connection between the re-emergence of Shanghai and an older Chinese cosmopolitanism lost in 1949 (though partially preserved in its mirror-city of Hong Kong). Hong Kong is in many ways the lens through which Lee views the emerging Shanghai<sup>1</sup> and indeed his book comes at the end of a decade in which Shanghai’s past had been subject of a concerted effort of remembrance in Hong Kong’s academic and popular culture alike. In opening up new directions for the future the post-1978 reforms necessarily shifted perspectives on the past; they raised questions of “what if”, of paths chosen and paths discarded. Hong Kong (and Taiwan, built on a very different form of exodus) was faced with a re-convergence of paths as 1997 drew close. This was political convergence (with 2042 in the deep background)<sup>2</sup> and also economic, as China’s urban commercial-led expansion recalled that of Hong Kong (and Taiwan) since the 1950s. Would Shanghai and Hong Kong represent a cultural convergence, the cosmopolitan culture of the former partially preserved by the latter, and both returning centre stage in a new reformed China?

Lee's book evokes the cosmopolitan world of Shanghai of the 1920s and 1930s which came to an end in the second world war and subsequent civil war. The book builds on and extends an international scholarship – much of it North American – which attempted to unearth this period from the rubble of capitalist and imperialist exploitation under which it had been buried by Communist historiography. In this revised image we have a thriving metropolis providing space for a growing Chinese financial and industrial capital and an emergent urban middle class enjoying material comforts on a par with its counterparts in other great international cities. This ongoing task of Shanghai historical research was an

archeology of knowledge, a pursuit of a specific type of knowledge acquired through systematic description of rich artifacts and archives otherwise buried or glossed over by standard sociopolitical histories of modern China. (Zhang 1999:4).

This historical work continues, with new books on this period appearing all the time; but retrieving the image of Shanghai was of more than pure historical interest. Clearly some of this revision of “standard” – that is Communist – “sociopolitical histories” in the 1980s and 1990s followed the pattern set by revisionist accounts of the French and Russian revolutions, in which emergent forces of liberalism and capitalism were brutally cut down before they could fully develop. The two quotes at the beginning echo this narrative. But Lee's evocation of Shanghai modernity is much more complex than this.

Lee rejects the simplistic description of those new spaces of modernity – the new buildings, the department stores, the coffee houses, dance halls, public parks, race course, not to mention the public cultural space opened up by publishing, cinemas, recorded music and so on – as colonial, and those who inhabited them as mimicking their western masters. He evokes an “urban cultural sensibility rooted in cosmopolitanism” (339), of openness to the world:

If cosmopolitanism means an abiding curiosity in “looking out” – locating oneself as cultural mediator at the intersection between China and other parts of the world – then Shanghai in the 1930s was the cosmopolitan city par excellence. (Lee 1999: 315)

The city is a cosmopolitan space in which new forms of a distinctly modern Chinese culture emerge from their encounter with Western and Japanese modernity. Lee argues strongly not just against the accusation of “mimicry” but also those that suggest this cosmopolitanism was superficial and had/ could have little impact against the inertia of traditional culture. Arguing against just such a characterization of the 1930s by Joseph Levenson in 1966, as that writer witnessed the wiping out of “whatever traces of cosmopolitanism still remained in Shanghai” (313), Lee sees the return of Shanghai in the 1990s as a redemption of the cosmopolitan promise of *Shanghai modern*. As we shall see shortly, Ackbar Abbas (2000) was to immediately question the notion of “cosmopolitan”; but I would argue that for Lee cosmopolitanism represented not just a particular “urban cultural sensibility” but a space of historical possibility.

Lee's positive evocation of a bygone *Shanghai modern* certainly related to hopes for the future of post-reform China; but its openness to the world, its role as "cultural mediator", suggested more than simply throwing in its lot with western modernity – either in the 1930s or now. For Shanghai's "urban cultural sensibility" was certainly linked to the material comforts and possibilities brought by western technology and trade, but this "material culture" was negotiated via an artistic and literary modernism. This modernism, itself an import (usually via Japan), was a means by which western modernity could be assimilated to Chinese traditional culture and used to create a new kind of modern Chinese culture. The power of *Shanghai modern*, as I read it in Lee, lies in its opening up of alternative possible modernities between Chinese tradition and colonial imitation. It locates modernism in the wider swirl of ideas which erupted in China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This modernism is a situated, provisional urban cultural working through of that conundrum outlined in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century China: "Chinese learning for essence, Western learning for practical use". Unlike Baudelaire's Paris, in which modernity was cultural catastrophe, Shanghai modernism shared more of the 1920s avant-garde enthusiasm for the possibilities of modernity. It was not just a celebration of Mao Dun's "Light, Heat, Power" but an attempt to use these new possibilities of modernity to renew Chinese culture (Mao 1979).

This is much more than a problem for historiography or "archeology". Though these tasks are important, and help us, in the word of Andrew Jones (2001) "complicate" standard historical accounts, there is a tendency to construct *Shanghai modern* as a lost antique world in a way akin to Benjamin's notion of historicism – the past "as it really was". In contrast Benjamin's practice sought to reconstruct the epoch for its contemporary relevance, "in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history" (Benjamin 1969: 263). This was the *Jetztzeit* or "now-time" in which past connects to the present. Lee's discussion of the emergence of popular cultural nostalgia for old Shanghai in the 1980s relates to this. Faced with the reversion to mainland China in 1997 Hong Kong – which had abandoned itself to money making (very successfully) – became conscious of itself in the mirror of a past Shanghai. Shanghai provided a form of historical memory in a city which most saw as having abandoned this:

Nostalgia in this case has gone beyond pastiche and parody to offer a historical allegory: if the past no longer exists – a common metaphor for a place such as Hong Kong – it must be reinvented in order to make a new connection with the present. (Lee 1999:336)

Does this "flashing up" of an image of the past also represent "a moment of danger"? If Hong Kong and Shanghai represent a new space of cosmopolitan openness for the new China might the historical disappearance of *Shanghai modern* not also prefigure that of Hong Kong in 1997? Has Hong Kong woken up only at the moment of its disappearance? But what is this image that is being invoked and what is at stake in its survival or disappearance.

It is surely more than an “urban cultural sensibility”, at least insofar as this is reduced to “urbanity”; it was more a space to think through the profound challenges of China’s encounter with modernity. “Mediation” was not simply translation but concerned with new directions, new possibilities within a renewed modern China. These implications have been drawn out by Meng Yue’s *Shanghai and the Edges of Empires* (2006) which attempts to reconstruct a number of different projects or moments in which the possibilities for a different kind of Chinese modernity might emerge from its encounter with the world. These possibilities emerged from Shanghai’s position as a liminal site, at the intersection of different empires. These projects of culture (a pleasure garden), technology (the arsenal<sup>3</sup>), knowledge (publishing) and commerce (the *New World* entertainment centre) represented possibilities for a different Chinese modernity. The return of *Shanghai modern* was surely a re-opening of that space of dialogue about the possibilities of modernity in China, a space that had progressively narrowed until the forces of empire, war and revolution finally shut it down –subsequently channeling it within post-war Fordist-capitalist and communist modernization.

However, that cosmopolitan modernity represented by Shanghai’s past and (possible) future was also being retrieved more generally in the 1980s and 1990s. The western literature on which Lee draws to help uncover Shanghai’s modernity testifies to extensive work in cultural history and cultural studies which had rendered the linear narratives of modernization problematic. In Marshall Berman’s seminal *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1983) technological-industrial modernization and the socio-cultural forms of modernity to which this gives rise become uneasy bedfellows. Berman’s continued commitment to the modern looked back to an older modernity than that represented by a “high modernism” which either uncritically welcomed or utterly rejected modernization. It was in the messy modernism of “the street”, that Berman located the historical existential confrontation with both the dangers and possibilities of modernity. These possibilities had also been ironed flat by the different technocratic modernisations of capitalism and communism, as had the messy streets by the urban planners and architects who served them.

Perry Anderson’s famous response was to situate the promise of modernism in a particular moment before the Second World War which had now definitively disappeared (Anderson 1984). But Berman’s intent was to open up the history of modernism to a wider material, and above all, urban culture of modernity and retrieve its possibilities for a contemporary historical moment.<sup>4</sup> As with Koolhaas’ search for a more unruly modern urbanism than that of the International School, Berman’s evocation of “the street” was part of a wider rejection of the Fordist city subject to zoning and functional planning. Indeed, the 1970s saw the beginning of that nostalgia for the 19<sup>th</sup> century city – with its anarchic energies and grotesque excesses – before it was tamed by Fordist planning.<sup>5</sup> This nostalgia was clearly associated with the disappearance of the industrial city and the first stirrings of



“culture-led urban regeneration” (Zukin 1982). But this retrieval of “modernism in the streets” was also a political one – part of the post-1968 New Left rejection of the older communist parties and a re-examination of culture and politics in the age of “the cultural is political”. We might see the urban culture unearthed by Lee as both pre- and post-Communist, and it is so in a way that evokes a sense of the re-opening of possibilities much more exciting than any overdue re-insertion of Shanghai into global capitalism. Viewed in this light a return of *Shanghai modern* would present problems for those in the driving seat of the city’s new round of modernization.

#### IV

Any archeology of *Shanghai modern*, concerned to excavate buried pasts and complicate the easy narratives of “standard sociopolitical histories”, needs also to take cognizance of the hard choices forced on contemporary actors. Decisions were made and paths taken which can be reviewed but not belittled by the backward glance of contemporary cultural history and theory. The return of *Shanghai modern* would inevitably problematise the choices made and the roads taken. In particular it would re-open the debates on artistic and cultural autonomy of the 1930s and the codification of the CPC solution by Mao at Yan’an in 1946. Many of those educated, battle-hardened cadres who returned with the Red Army in 1949 were also looking to atone for their indulgences in the urban milieu of Shanghai and to justify their subsequent political decisions (Andreas 2009). However Shanghai might look from the vantage of Hong Kong, for those driving the city forward the archeology of the city’s past was inevitably politically charged.

In the very last pages of his book Lee equates the return of cosmopolitanism with the opening up of Shanghai to foreign capital, as exemplified by its internationally designed architecture. This has:

spurred a massive research project on Shanghai’s history and culture<sup>6</sup>...[a]nd a new generation of Shanghai writers and poets have begun to explore...what they call a new “urban consciousness” (*dushi yishi*) – a subject of which they had previously known practically nothing. A journal called *Shanghai Culture* (Shanghai Wenhua) was launched in 1993 [and] reaffirms the “deep and solid foundation of the school of Shanghai culture, with its splendid tradition of assimilating outside culture with an open mind”. (340)

It is against this too easy linkage that Ackbar Abbas responded in *Cosmopolitan De-scriptions: Shanghai and Hong Kong* (2000). He questioned the assumption that cosmopolitanism is an unproblematic, universal value. Cosmopolitanism was quite capable of operating side-by-side with nationalism and imperialism: “foreign domination and local appropriation are not necessarily mutually exclusive” (775). In Shanghai inequality – “splendour and squalor” – could be pushed to grotesque extremes; and this in turn reminds us that “the cosmopolitan ‘attitude’ in this case consists not in the toleration of difference but in the necessary cultivation

of indifference” (2000; 775). This is not to deny that in “negotiating the anomalies of extraterritoriality... a kind of grace comes out of the grotesque” (786) but it is to situate Shanghai in its “non-viable” context. Shanghai had managed to become one of the most open cities in the world:

The other side of this freedom and openness, however, was a certain isolation—a linkage to the world that went together with a delinkage from the rest of China. There was always something very fragile about Shanghai cosmopolitanism. After 1949, Chinese communism, born in Shanghai, quickly made Shanghai’s urban culture no more than a memory. (Abbas 2000: 776)

This is a crucial point because it places the task of modern nation-building – to which *Shanghai modern* contributed via its creation of a new “imagined community” (cf. Lee 1999: 45-50) – in a much more tragic light. Shanghai’s cosmopolitanism had come at a certain cost – its delinkage from the rest of China – and it was incapable of effecting that transition to a real national community achieved by the Communist mobilization of the peasantry. It makes the easy narratives of the “interruption” of an incipient modernity represented by Shanghai much less easy to sustain. It also makes the return of Shanghai and its historical memory much more problematic.

Abbas points to the fact that the global space to which Shanghai is now (re-) opening up is not a space of “internationalism” but of “globalization”, where the nation-state is now constantly by-passed by global capital flows which move freely within and between localities. Abbas uses the term *glocalisation*, which was first used

to describe the need to adapt a global outlook to local conditions, a kind of “micro-marketing”... [and as] encapsulated now in the corporate slogan “think globally, act locally,” is a top-down approach to society, however: a hybrid term, it concludes by homogenising the hybrid and local. (784)

The notion of “cultural mediation” is no longer the job of the cosmopolitan open to otherness but of capitalism itself through a process of “arbitrage”, where global capital finds ways of articulating itself within a series of different localities. The easy equation of cosmopolitanism with “openness” is not possible. That indifference Abbas saw in an earlier cosmopolitanism is now written into the very space of contemporary cities whose insertion into global flows have made them “non-places”:

The overcomplex space of non-places means, among other things, that even the anomalous detail may no longer be recognisable as such because it coexists with a swarm of other such details. This means the anomalous is in danger of turning non-descript, in much the same way that the more complex the city today, the more it becomes a city without qualities. The cosmopolitan as urban phenomenon is inevitably inscribed in such non-places and paradoxes... (772-3)

How does this phase of rapid urban expansion in an age of globalization leave the history of *Shanghai Modern*? The “massive research project on Shanghai’s history and culture” noted by Lee was precisely meant to address this; it would position

“its splendid tradition of assimilating outside culture with an open mind” as a central resource for becoming a global city. As Wen-Hsin Yeh (2007) describes it,

Shanghai historians rallied to throw their weight behind the city’s modernization project and to make the intellectual case in favor of the outlined change.... [T]he historians, through their descriptions of the city’s recent past, embraced Shanghai’s modern history as a chronicle of Shanghai’s uniqueness, if not China’s pride. By doing so they set aside an old-fashioned, revolutionary belief and refashioned the city’s urban identity. (211)

Is this the return of *Shanghai modern* anticipated by Lee? Not quite. Yeh goes on to describe the project in terms that would not appear out of step with the revisionist histories of the last thirty years.

By shifting attention away from colonialism, capitalism, Nationalist betrayal, and Communist martyrdom, new images emerged that described a middle class city of material comfort in everyday life that was making steady progress in the enhancement of wealth and health... Instead of dwelling upon the structural injustices in the “social relations of production” under capitalism, the more innovative historians chronicled the scientific and technological advancement in “modes of production”<sup>7</sup> as the city underwent modernization... Pre-1949 Shanghai was the making... *neither* of the colonialists *nor* the capitalists. It was, instead the work of the petty urbanites who were the occupants... of the *shikumen* residences. In the words of Zhang Zhongli, president of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, “The bottom line is: Shanghai was Chinese, Shanghai was Shanghainese. The city developed as a result of the people in Shanghai making innovations on inspirations taken from the West”. (211-2)

This, I would suggest, is not a setting aside of the “old fashioned revolutionary belief” *per se*. It was the discourse of surpassing represented by the Pudong skyscrapers overlooking The Bund. It re-positioned the Communist party as able to lead a new modernization process in which primary industrialization within the context of social equality gave way to a modern market-driven urban consumer economy. As most observers noted, this rapid process of urban modernization was accompanied by large-scale urban demolition and re-location not seen in the West since the 1950s and 1960s. Lee notes the nostalgia for old Shanghai as a phenomenon in Shanghai as well as Hong Kong; but in fact much of this was a desperate attempt by people to stay in the real houses and real communities that they actually lived in. Nostalgia, like everything else, had to move pretty sharply in Shanghai because the *shikumen*’s return as memory-image happened at the same time as its disappearance in fact. And indeed as its re-appearance as style (Liang 2008; O’Connor & Xin Gu 2012). The paradoxes abound; the return of Shanghai is feted as a return of an older urban sensibility ironed flat by Communist modernization but is subjected to a top-down urban master-planned modernization worthy of Robert Moses.

This was a crucial insight of Abbas. Shanghai’s rapid modernization did not remove the past completely – as in classic post-war urbanism – but engaged in demolition and preservation at the same time.

Preservation in Shanghai is motivated by something quite different from the usual pieties about “cultural heritage,” which, given the city’s colonial past, can only be ambiguous. It is motivated more by anticipations of a new Shanghai to rival the old than simply by nostalgia for the past. In other words, preservation is something more complex than just a question of the past remembered: in Shanghai, the past allows the present to pursue the future; hence “memory” itself is select and fissured, sometimes indistinguishable from amnesia. This paradox of the past as the future’s future also throws a particular light on Shanghai’s urban development, which, like preservation, takes on a special quality: Shanghai today is not just a city on the make with the new and brash everywhere—as might be said more aptly of Shenzhen, for example. It is also something more subtle and historically elusive: the city as remake, a shot-by-shot reworking of a classic, with the latest technology, a different cast, and a new audience. Not “Back to the Future” but “Forward to the Past”. (780)

Shanghai historians might provide the basis for a re-interpretation of the city’s ambiguous colonial past in the light of present exigencies; many of the papers in this issue, Ma Ran and Lu Pan in particular, attest to some of the elisions and omissions in this process. But the past was also being mobilised as global image capital:

Invoking a continuity with a legendary past—no matter how ambiguous that past may have been—enhances the city’s attractiveness, gives it historical cachet, and hence equips it to compete for foreign investment and the tourist trade on more favourable terms. The past is a kind of symbolic capital. At the same time, preservation often accompanies the revitalization and gentrification of decaying areas of the city and contributes to urban renewal. (781)

What “past” underlies this “symbolic capital”? To a certain extent it is a ready-made image of that exotic “divine decadence” associated with Shanghai in the popular imagination of the West, readily promoted in travel magazines and fashion supplements. It is also, as we have suggested, used as an index of progress – this is what we have now absorbed and surpassed. But Abbas’ reference to its role in “urban renewal” points also to something else. The messy modernity of “the streets”, the pre-modernised, pre-Fordist city, key to the allure of Shanghai in both academic and popular references, is not being by-passed in Shanghai but adapted *as it had become* from the West. The possibilities evoked by Marshall Berman and grasped by a new generation of urban cultural policy thinkers and activists had, from the 1990s, become compromised by their association with city boosterism and real estate development. Indeed, the retrieval of modernism’s wider connection with the material culture of urban modernity which Berman had helped inspire, had very easily drifted into a celebration of urban consumer cultures as an index of modernity on a par with that of technological modernization.

The “cultural intermediaries” identified by Sharon Zukin (1982), recreating a bohemian-artistic zone in the heart of Manhattan, were quickly replaced by the cultural “arbitrage” of a new kind of real estate development in which historical patina and neo-bohemian “cool” worked together. The “creative clusters” discussed by Sheng Zhong and Gu Xin in this issue were the result less of top-down planning (though they became that too) than incremental learning via a range of architects, artists, gallery owners, cultural policy agencies, Hong Kong and Tai-

wanese developers, academic “gurus” and so on in association with an emerging local and foreign clientele (cf. Ren 2011). A process of “mediation” or “arbitrage” at the micro level represented the day-to-day algorithms of a Shanghai culture-led urban regeneration which rapidly traversed that arc which had run between Jane Jacob’s sixties paean to a “mixed-use” street-level neighborhood urbanism (1961) and the glitzy hang-outs of Richard Florida’s creative class (2002).

## V

For Wen-Hsin Yeh writing in 2007:

the past...has ceased to have much relevance in Shanghai’s relentless drive to climb the heights of material transformation in its embrace of the world. The city, thanks to the Shanghai historians, had liberated itself from the long-established master narrative of socialism against capitalism, and nationalism against colonialism. It had arrived happily at an almost “weightless” state free of the burden of its past. There were no more denunciations against the evils of capitalism or colonialism. Instead, what was materially beneficial for Shanghai had to be ethically good and historically right. (216)

The Shanghai authorities have “set aside” the discursive framework established since the Opium War and are “shedding the weight of history” (217). In this weightless state individual histories are allowed to float free, and vie with each other for “a place in urban memories”. Memories are simply an aspect of each individual’s identity with no connection to any historical narrative.

But how do we know if we have reached an epochal moment in Shanghai’s – or China’s – history if so much of what we hear, said or unsaid, seems reminiscent, in bits and pieces at least, of century-old descriptions.

Another irony: in this account the return of the possibilities contained in Lee’s *Shanghai modern* turned out to be their dissolution into individual reminiscences with no wider historical traction. Indeed, we are back with Jameson’s end of temporality, the absence of any grand narrative other than that of capitalism expanding in space towards the horizon.

This seems to me to underplay the sense of history still claimed by the CPC and indeed its sensitivity to the fissures and ambiguities of its “innovative” re-writing of Shanghai’s past – as we see throughout this issue. The “opening up” which many saw heralded by the return of *Shanghai modern* was highly partial; it was a retrieval of an urban heroic modernization – Manhattanism – without any of the open ambiguities of the modernity which went with this. Or rather, the ambiguities returned as style. It was a narrowing down or hollowing out of the promises of an older urban modernity into new forms of lifestyle consumption. The individuation of memories is not (only) the result of the weightlessness of postmodern history but the concomitant exclusion of any form of social input into the plans taken and decisions made by the city on behalf of its citizens.

But the “heroic modernization” of urban China – and its “trickle-down” economics of which Shanghai is emblematic – is a precarious balancing trick. Not only does it hope that those who “got rich first”, in Deng Xiaoping’s famous formulation (cf. Hewitt 2010), find ways of passing it down, but that the big Eastern cities find a way of passing it on to the interior. Neither of these appear to be happening, and in this context, with the growing unrest in town and country alike, history appears to be gaining weight again.

It took Mao Zedong’s genius to see, against the grain of orthodox Marxism, that even rural spaces, at least in the historical situation of China, had a crucial role to play in modern and national life. This was the insight that allowed Mao to displace cities in general from their role as the sole exclusive site of modernity—and Shanghai in particular from its claim to be China’s preeminent city. After 1949, the city could no longer enjoy the privilege of being a law unto itself: it was clearly the nation that now held sway over the city. (Abbas 2000: 776)

Once again the lines of historical fissure appear not just within the city but between it and rural China. If Shanghai has a “messy modernity” it is to be found in the spaces created by the city’s vast social inequalities and the difficulties faced by the authorities in sweeping the losers under the carpets of its *Prada* shops (cf. Anna Greenspan in this issue). Shanghai, like the other big cities, depends on rural China for the reproduction of the migrant, unregistered (because they are not allowed to be) workforce for which it refuses any social benefits (Lee 2007). These grotesqueries suggest a return of a messy modernity which no-one desired and which register Shanghai with Mike Davis’ “Planet of Slums” (2006) as much as the municipal council’s “City of Culture”. Shanghai itself has its fissures that few writing in the *Shanghai modern* mode have adequately registered. It is a city that has not just been woken up, de-mummified and thrust into the global image maelstrom as the opening quotes imply; it is a de-industrialised city with as strong a sense of its collective industrial past as of its cosmopolitan openness. The “city of finance and culture” did not step into the vacant spaces left by older industries as in the West; it shoved them aside (see Xin Gu in this issue). As the monumental documentary *West of the Tracks* (Dir. Wang Bing, 2003) testifies, this has produced a powerful sense of loss throughout the great industrial (or “rustbelt”) centre of China.

In this context history is not weightless but clearly at the heart of the contestation between rich and poor, powerful and powerless which is occurring in China – as elsewhere across the globe. Claims that the return of Shanghai to its leading role represent a return to the path of normal, Western modernity are thus somewhat double edged – for Western modernity is no longer what it was.

After a meticulous historical reconstruction of the Cultural Revolution – *Mao’s Last Revolution* (2006) – in which their narrative voice remains firmly in the background, Roderick Macfarquhar and Michael Schoenhals allow themselves a highly charged conclusion. The attempt “to modernize whilst preserving their integrity as a people and a culture” (2006: 459) which had pre-occupied China

since the Opium War had floundered with the dissolution of Confucianism as Chinese “essence”. The CCP replaced this with Marxism-Leninism; tired of aping foreigners (the Soviets) the Cultural Revolution “was [Mao’s] last best effort to define and perpetuate a distinct Chinese essence in the modern world” (460). Its failures

led Deng to abandon this vain search for a Chinese version of modernity that had preoccupied the nation’s politicians and intellectuals for well over a century. China had to jump on the bandwagon of successful Western-style modernization that had proved so effective in Taiwan and elsewhere in east Asia. The Cultural Revolution became the economic and social watershed of modern Chinese history. (2006: 460)

History has fallen to earth again with a clang! Not just Communism but a distinct Chinese modernity is ruled as always impossible, and the whole century-long detour to Western modernization (that is, capitalism) has merely been a tale of “sound and fury”. Lee’s *Shanghai modern*, other than a premonition of China fully embracing Western modernization, disappears in smoke. In fact Macfarquhar and Schoenhals’ assertions alert us to fact that *Shanghai modern* floated to the surface of historical consciousness at the same time that the Cultural Revolution, and the debates it had stirred up, was consigned to the outer darkness. Both “conservatives” and “liberals” both agree on this. That Shanghai was the capital of this Cultural Revolution is something that is buried deep, invisible other than the point zero from which the new Shanghai arose (Perry & Li 1997; Owen Hatherley in this issue).

The Cultural Revolution certainly undermined the legitimacy of the CPC, as Macfarquhar and Schoenhals argue, but did it undermine the legitimacy of the 1949 Revolution? What makes the Cultural Revolution so sensitive is not just the revelation of past excesses which the CPC is keen to move beyond, making good by its delivery of economic growth. The burial of the Cultural Revolution is used as proxy to bury those debates about class divisions and common ownership which neither the “conservatives” nor the “liberals” are keen to address. It side-steps another, active “nostalgia” for that common collective effort involved in building a revolutionary Chinese nation which many now see as undergoing systematic and massive privatization. The skyscrapers of Shanghai might elicit the pride of some citizens; they certainly do not elicit the same identification as with the collective building of China’s industrial base.

*Mao’s Last Revolution* does not engage at all with the ideas being fought over in the Cultural Revolution – the actors are mere puppets in Mao’s political maneuverings. We might point to two areas where this summary dismissal simply will not work. First, there has long been recognition of the importance of Mao’s collectivization and rural industrialization for subsequent future growth (Spence 1999; Naughton 2007). A key area of debate is the emergence of the Town and Village Enterprises (TVEs) in the late 1970s and the way such “rural entrepreneurialism” fed into the reform process (cf. White 1998; Huang 2008; Andreas 2010). The point here is that the narratives of reform by conservatives and liberals

– agreeing on the benign nature of market-led reform but differing over the role of liberal democracy in this process – both present it as a break from the past. In fact something much more complex was occurring which concerned not just the roles of state and market but the specific nature of the state and the kind of market it was creating. Recent questions around the easy narrative of “market reforms” raised by Yasheng Huang (2008; and see Anna Greenspan in this issue) and the response by Joel Andreas (2010) raise exactly these questions from different political perspectives.

Second, Joel Andreas’ work (2009) on the revolution and education (“better Red than Expert”) since 1949 raises serious issues about the post-reform dismissal of the Cultural Revolution and its educational policies. Burying these debates about the relation between education and social class as so obviously beyond the pale is closely related to the rapid acceleration of social inequality in China and the solidification of a new kind of ruling elite reproduced (in part) through the restored university system.

Both of these debates chime with the attempt by the Chinese “new left” to find alternative accounts of the post-reform period in which new forms of state and collective ownership, markets, private enterprise and democratic accountability can be found. That is, a rejection of the neo-liberal model in both its western and Chinese versions (cf. Wang 2003). Indeed, my one caveat with Abbas’ account is his portrait of the state as somehow redundant in this new world of global capitalism, other than its management of the past as image capital. In fact, it is become clear just how deeply constitutive the Chinese state has been of the capitalism it set in motion and continues to manage. Indeed, previously wary of exposing its managerialism in the high days of neo-liberalism before 2008, it has since made its power to firmly manage the economy a key source of differentiation between it and a West in deep economic trouble.

Debates in China about the role of the state still contain within them strong elements of the collective nation-building and social equity that gave rise to the 1949 revolution. Indeed, the heroic modernization still present in the cities of urban China – to which Hatherley in this issue attests – does gain a residual charge from that historic task assumed by the CPC. In these circumstances there is no reason to suggest that the weight of history has vanished in the smoke of economic growth. Not only are the social tensions clearly in evidence in China – with the legacy of the 1949 revolution still in play around demands for collective justice, however attenuated – but China is now rubbing against very different “edges of Empire” than those of *Shanghai modern*. China itself, as the world’s second largest economy, sits at the table of the global hegemony, but as Abbas’ presciently showed, the world of global modernity takes us beyond the age of nationalism into that of “empire” (Hardt & Negri 2002).

I certainly do not want here to resurrect some other myth of the Cultural Revolution to set against that of *Shanghai modern*. These two have been set against



each other as cosmopolitanism versus inwardness, but this opposition has hidden another less visible one: between ideals of collective consumption and social equity and the pleasures and freedoms of urban modernity. But the promises of *Shanghai modern* have been hollowed out by their incarnation in the glittery consumption of Shanghai, just as have the many of the social gains of the revolution. If there is some *impasse* in contemporary Chinese history it is that between the conservatives clamping down on democratic cultural expression and the liberals who see this as only possible in a free market.

Unlike Macfarquhar and Schoenhals the distinguished historian of China Mark Elwin suggests that the problems of Chinese modernity – raised in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s, when Confucianism died as an intellectual force – are still very much with us.

People can and do refer to “the” Chinese revolutions of 1911 and 1949, meaning in the main particular sequences of twentieth-century military and political events, and this is acceptable as shorthand. But perhaps the most effective way to acquire a feeling for these life-changing processes as a whole is to begin, not with the political on its own, or political events over a relatively brief space of time, but with the deeper changes in the imagined but emotionally powerful *stories* in terms of which people understand their lives, as a long-term phenomenon. (Elwin 2011: 83)

Elwin returns us to some key themes set out in that period which have remained with China since:

This debate did not of course end in a single agreed programme; but it did identify a set of problems for China, relating to what we loosely call political, economic and social “modernity”, which permanently altered the underlying nature of policy debate in China... The radical conceptual and cultural realignment associated with the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s has, in contrast [to 1911 and 1949], much more of the character of something that was all but inevitable and irreversible. (101)

Of course if, like Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, we collapse modernity into western modernity and both into western capitalist modernity – and they are not alone (Hutton 2007; Fergusson 2011) – then there is never going to be much wriggle room. But Elwin connects us here with the modernity evoked by Lee in *Shanghai modern*: how to deal with western modernity and to make it their own not at the level of imported institutions (though they have a place) but in the “stories in terms of which people understand their lives”. This surely is the “urban cultural sensibility” Lee looked to in *Shanghai modern* but which in many respects became the mere image capital for a global skyline. Abbas, at the end of his article, asks what a contemporary cosmopolitan can be today:

The cosmopolitan today will have to include at least some of the less privileged men and women placed or displaced in the transnational space of the city and who are trying to make sense of its spatial and temporal contradictions: the cosmopolitan not as a universalist arbiter of value, but as an arbitrageur/arbitrageuse.[.] This is arbitrage with a difference. It does not mean the use of technologies to maximise profits in a global world but refers to everyday strategies for negotiating the disequilibria and dislocations that globalism has created [and]... to the larger historical lessons that can be drawn from our experiences of the city. (Abbas 2000: 786)

Uncoupling Chinese modernity from both Western and capitalist modernity might find a way to engage with a new heroic modernity – a frank acknowledgement of the challenges that face us and the means required to achieve this – in which collective action and provision is charged with the same libido as the individualised desires of consumption. This seems to lie behind some of the more recent attempts to retrieve modernism in the West (cf. Hatherley 2009), and it chimes with that of Berman and Koolhaas in the 1980s. It will mean a break with the nostalgic evocation of *Shanghai modern* as a lost world and a retrieval of the emergency situation in which an urban cultural sensibility was being carved out of a fragile, explosive political context. Because surely that is what we are faced with now?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Frequently this is also via the writer Eileen Chang's exiled view of Shanghai from Hong Kong, though she later took up permanent exile in Los Angeles.
- <sup>2</sup> 2042 was when the Special Autonomous Region of Honk Kong would revert back to the mainland political system. It was also the title of a film by Wong Kar-wai .
- <sup>3</sup> An archeological site recently obliterated by the Expo. On this mix of preservation and destruction of the past see Abbas (2000) and the papers by Lü Pan and Ma Ran in this issue.
- <sup>4</sup> In this it set a pattern for much subsequent work on the history of modernism; indeed it was Lee's opening chapters, in which he contextualized the modernist writers which made up the core of the book, which were most influential.
- <sup>5</sup> I might highlight in particular the seminar work by Jonathon Raban (1974) *Soft City*.
- <sup>6</sup> Lee acknowledges at this point that his book was written with financial support from this Shanghai Academy of Social Science research programme.
- <sup>7</sup> The quotations around these concepts are quite telling – clearly indicating that the author things they are merely lip service to a now out-dated Marxism. In fact “mode of production” should be “forces of production”.

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