

## **(Re-)Reading Shanghai's Futures in Ruins: Through the Legend of an (Extra-)Ordinary Woman in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai***

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### **Abstract**

This essay is an allegorical reading of Shanghai futures through a fictive woman, Wang Qiyao, in Wang Anyi's novel, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai* (1996). The novel is about her life in China from the 1940s to the 1980s. Using Benjamin's critique of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris in relation to Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s ("the Paris of the Orient") the essay examines questions of phantasmagoria, nostalgia, memory and awakening and relates these to the possible Shanghai futures to come.

**Keywords:** *Longtang*, Walter Benjamin, phantasmagoria, allegory, nostalgia, ordinariness

## I Modernity: Phantasmagoria and Ruin

### Wang Qiyao and Shanghai

In the afternoon, when the phonograph plays next door, that's Wang Qiyao humming along with "Song of the Four Seasons." Those girls [rush] off to the theater ... There is a three-mirrored vanity in her bedchamber. ... The fashion trends in Shanghai rely completely upon Wang Qiyao's. But they are incapable of setting things into motion ... Uncomplaining, they carry the spirit of the times on their backs ... Between the media and the stage, there are men working behind the scenes to create a fashion perfectly suited to Wang Qiyao, a fashion that moreover seems to anticipate Wang Qiyao's every need and desire. (Wang 2008: 22-4)

Wang Qiyao is "the typical daughter of the Shanghai *longtang*" (22) which are "vast neighborhoods inside enclosed alleys", and are "the backdrop of this city" (3).<sup>1</sup> Her story is the story of every Shanghai girl, and is, at the same time, the novel of Shanghai,<sup>2</sup> as reflected in the subtitle of the novel. Wang "walks" from capitalism in the 40s, socialism in the 60s, to capitalism with socialist characteristics in the 80s. She is different from Mrs. Dalloway. Her life is not compressed in a day; rather, the modern development of China is compressed in her life.

A film director says that Wang Qiyao looks like Ruan Lingyu (1910-35), a legendary Shanghainese film star in 1930s. (35) Both women are models for their Shanghai girl contemporaries to follow. The life of Wang, an ordinary girl dreaming of an extraordinary modern life, is as tragic as Ruan's. Both tragic lives are related to something which is not true. Ruan committed suicide because of a rumour against her, and left several suicide notes. One of them writes, "Gossip is a fearful thing." (Meyer 2005: 61) Wang lives in illusion, and is finally awakened at the end of her life:

The last image caught in Wang Qiyao's eyes was that of the hanging lamp swinging back and forth. ... [S]he was trying hard to figure out where she had seen it before. Then, in the last moment, her thoughts raced through time, and the film studio from forty years ago appeared before here. ... There, in that three-walled room on the set, a woman lay draped across a bed during her final moments; above her a light swung back and forth, projecting wavelike shadows onto the walls. Only now did she finally realize that *she* was the woman on that bed – she was the one who had been murdered. And then the light was extinguished and everything slipped into darkness. (Wang 2008: 429)

Forty years ago, what she saw was the opposite:

The set locations may have been dilapidated and in despair, but the images captured by the camera were always perfectly beautiful. On one or two occasions they actually saw some of those famous movie stars, who sat in front of the camera doing nothing, like a collection of *idle props*. Film scripts were revised at random, and in the blink of an eye even the dead could come back to life. (Wang 2008: 34; my italics)

Wang Qiyao is murdered at the end of the novel which, ironically, is set in the background of the new era of China in the 1980s. (What is the implication then if the novel is the novel of Shanghai?) It seems that the whole novel sarcastically

describes her life as an independent woman with a strong will to live no matter what hardship she encounters. In order to understand the tragedy of her life, it is necessary to read the beginning and the end of the novel again. When she is dying, she sees the phantasmagoric image (“the hanging lamp swinging back and forth”), and is awakened to the fact that the murdered woman she saw in the film studio at the beginning of the novel was her; in other words, contrary to what she saw in the film studio, she is dead right from the start. She is the living dead; and her fate has been sealed from the beginning. What is more tragic is the fact that she only realizes this at the end of the novel. The phantasmagoric (glamorous, but broken) image blinds her from seeing the dark side of her life. Her life in Shanghai is like a filmic dream. If she had had the ability to read the film studio scene differently right at the beginning of the novel, different futures might have opened to her.<sup>3</sup> Or, to read her fatalistically, Wang is framed to see what she can see. The imagined futures/fates of the city design her life.

The essay discusses whether the tragedy of Wang Qiyao sets the path for the future of Shanghai to follow, and, above all, how her awakening at the end of her death might provide any lessons for Shanghai’s futures. Modern capitalist development can be seen as a phantasmagoric dream for which Wang in the 1940s ardently longs. Below we see how Benjamin’s reading of nineteenth-century Paris as a phantasmagoric city is relevant to reading Shanghai’s future in a critical light. If, to follow Benjamin, phantasmagoric modern life constitutes the ruinous life in Paris, it is a *tragedy* that Shanghai, the “Paris of the Orient”, repeats the Parisian fate in the 1940s. And it would be a *farce* if the city cannot re-read its own past to live a future differently in the twenty first century. If the past is read differently, will the future will be different? We need to be cautious about a reading that suggests Wang does not yield to her fate, and is in control of her life by asserting her bourgeois lifestyle in the socialist China after 1949. Is the retention of a 1940s modern style of living an attempt to romanticize Old Shanghai? Does her nostalgia weaken her critical facilities and delay her awakening? In other words, her nostalgia imposes a reactionary reading of her life, and it leads to her tragedy.

After 1949, Wang lives in a nostalgic and melancholic mode with the disappearance of her glamorous life on the social stage and is left only with an ordinary life in the *longtang*; in other words, being “haunted” and framed by the past, she loses the ability to re-read, and to escape from the burden of the past. With reference to Abbas’s discussion of Stanley Kwan’s *Center Stage* (1992) (“the biography of Ruan Lingyu” (Abbas 1997: 44) and of the Shanghainese film industry in the 1930s) and Jia Zhangke’s *I Wish I Knew* (2010), I discuss how the past can be re-read differently so that Wang Qiyao could have realized her fragmented and illusionary life earlier and have perceived other possibilities of life ahead; otherwise, she can only have the same as destiny as Ruan who lacks the ability to re-read her situation, and cannot escape from tragedy.

## Modernity and Phantasmagoria

... [A]fter Deng Xiaoping's 1992 visit, and within the space of a few years, the Pudong area of Shanghai across the Huangpu River from the Bund has developed into a mini-Manhattan, following Deng's agenda for it: "A new look each year, a transformation in three years". ... In a few short years, Shanghai saw the construction of over a thousand skyscrapers, a subway line, a highway overpass ringing the city, another bridge and tunnel across the Huangpu to Pudong, and the urbanization of Pudong itself, now coming into being before our eyes like the speeded-up image of time-lapse film. (Abbas 2000: 779)

Reading contemporary Shanghai is like seeing a film. The images are gone while the understanding of them is still in the process of construction. No single, definite, and dominant reading is possible. When something is said, it already means another thing. Allegorical thinking is the response to the phantasmagoric (etymology: phantasm + allegoric) changes of a modern city. Benjamin is helpful at this point. He says, "[A]n appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory" (Benjamin 1996: 223). Any attempt to stabilize meaning and to achieve a homogenous understanding are doomed to failure in the age of modernity. Modernity promotes allegorical thinking. Allegory is an opaque concept. In the OED, it literally means "speaking otherwise than one seems to speak". Saying one thing and meaning the other, allegory "destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words 'mean what they say'" (Fletcher 1964: 2). Modernity challenges the limits of reading of modern Shanghai. This is the fascination of its cityscape. Nevertheless, such fascinating developments are destroyed by shaping them in a single path. Shanghai is getting more homogeneous; reading it becomes easy, but boring. With an increasing number of ordinary *longtang* being torn down, more and more "landmark" architecture – which can be placed anywhere – is erected in Shanghai. Shanghai, like Wang in 1940s, discards the *longtang*, and is becoming a "generic city" (Koolhaas 2005). Shanghai is an economically booming city; however such a "Wall Street of the Orient" is culturally and socially deficient. Progress becomes an irresistible force. Ordinary stories happening in each ordinary household in the *longtang* disappear under the grand narratives of capitalist modernity.

Haussmann's (1809-91) boulevard (a single spectacular passage, and an effective means to a planned destination) made Paris a modern city, "the capital of the nineteenth century", and, at the same time, made revolutionary barricades impossible. Paris developed economically, but, at the same time, was politically reactionary during the period of Haussmann's structural re-design. Boulevards served capitalist development and patriarchal control nicely. Shanghai in the 1940s, the "Paris of the Orient", follows the forced route of capitalist modernisation. Every Shanghai girl becomes the same Wang Qiyao. There is only one Wang Qiyao walking in the crowded boulevard. The cultural violence of progress is hidden behind the phantasmagoric spectacle. While destruction and construction seems to be normal, the economic development of a city is commonsensically good for everyone. When something becomes commonsensical, it requires no explanation.

This commonsense is implanted in the built form of the city through its monuments and its landmark architecture. What is violent becomes “natural and *goes without saying*” (Barthes 1999: 143). While the city becomes simplified, “Better City, Better Life” becomes a slogan without explanation and directly understood in the economic sense. The modern conditions of Shanghai is destined to be simplified, and in the Benjaminian sense, exist in only ruins (not because it is not well developed, rather it is too developed in such a way that other aspects of life are destroyed). Sadly, Wang thinks that she is unique, can have freedom to choose her ways of living, and change her fate through a beauty contest. In the end, the heterogeneous ordinary life described in the novel and which serves as the backdrop of her and others’ glamorous lives, is abandoned.

## II Longtang Life

### Longtang as Ordinary Walking Poems

Shanghai’s *longtang* come in many different forms, each with colors and sounds of its own. Unable to decide on any one appearance, they remain fickle ... (Wang 2008: 4).

When phantasmagoric modern life is ruinous, the *longtang*, which serve as the backdrop to Shanghai, also exist in fragments; but they do not serve as parts subsumed to the “whole”, the “Paris of the Orient”. In the *longtang*, ordinary life, in the eye of Wang Qiyao, is mundane, unchanging, and cannot keep up with the pace of modernity. However, each family in the *longtang* has its unique ordinary story, “accumulated over time” (Wang 2008:7). Walking in the *longtang* is like reading different unique stories hidden behind each household door. Each “turn of a street opens onto a striking view of an entire panorama” (Demetz 1986: xviii). Each ordinary story is heterogeneous, and cannot be reduced to one. Each Wang Qiyao in the *longtang* should be different. Walking in the *longtang*, to borrow from Barthes, places us in “the situation of the reader of the 100,000 million poems of Queneau, where one can find a different poem by changing a single line ...” (Barthes 1997: 170). “... [The city] is not ... a poem tidily centered on a subject. It is a poem which unfolds the signifier and it is this unfolding that ultimately the semiology of the city should try to grasp and make sing.” (Barthes 1997: 170-172) Each alley (not boulevard) which composes the *longtang* is a fragment, and, at the same time, a separate poem. If, for Paul Muldon, a poem is a “turn in the road” (“the way the poem twists and turns will suggest a very winding path” (Tambling 2007: 2)), the opposite is also true. At each turn of an alley, one never knows what happens; a new world is exposed. In OED, the word “alley” in French, *alee*, or *allée*, means “the act of walking, passage”, or “a walk or passage”. The word “boulevard”, originates from German *bollwerk* means “bulwark”. It obstructs idle walking. Numerous twists and turns in the *longtang* simply annoy a modern subject which sees walking only as a means. Walking aimlessly in a mo-

modern city hinders progressive development, and may endanger law and order; hence, loitering is illegal. When walking purposefully, a walker is blind to the abundant signs passing him/her because the only focus is on the planned destination. A modern person is not interested in reading the signs closely, waiting for the signifier to unfold, let alone respecting each story behind the household doors. It is not surprising to see that China as a nation catching up with the speed of modernity destroys the *hutong* in Beijing and the *longtang* in Shanghai. The *longtang* are like labyrinths consisting of multiple passages with numerous connections (Shapiro 2003: 70). An unequivocal reading is impossible. Shanghai's *longtang* are now replaced by the boulevards. Walking in the boulevard destroys all the passages (except the one heading for homogeneous progress driven by capitalist and patriarchal ideology) and connections with the rest of the city. There is only one dominant way of reading the city.

### Longtang as Labyrinths

Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state ... [T]he well-being under-expressed in the language it appears in like a fleeting glimmer is a spatial practice. (De Certeau 1988: 108)

Meanings are folded in the twists and turns of the *longtang* waiting for the walker/reader to decipher them during the process of "spatial practice". If such practice is done in a utilitarian way, the depth of meaning in ordinary life refuses to unfold itself. Then the city, to people who can only think in such a way, is as elusive as Walter Benjamin's writings (which are concerned with "the 'thingness' of the cities, the only places of historical experience" (Demetz 1986: xvii)). Benjamin is particularly interested in the small things which are miniaturizations of reality (Sontag 1996: 123). (Such trivial and ordinary items are ignored/repressed/destroyed by the speed of modernity.) He thinks that "the writer must stop and restart with every new sentence" (Benjamin 1996: 29). Each of his writing consists of a series of independent passages. Instead of leading to a fuller and comprehensive understanding of his thought, each passage is a labyrinth. 'Walking' from one passage to another is getting from one labyrinth to another one. Reading his passages is like walking in the *longtang* consisting of numerous disconnected "alleys" with "forty-nine levels of meaning" (Sontag 1996: 122). Benjamin, as an essayist, "unlike the systematic writer, might enter into the subject almost everywhere, for there are many entrances; what becomes important are the passages that he marks out, the structure that emerges" (Shapiro 2003: 66). Such walking/reading is a "pattern of advance and retreat, of circling round, is repeated on a larger scale in the unfolding or unrolling of the essay [and the *longtang*] itself" (Shapiro 2003: 67). Then, reading/walking in the passages, there is a feeling of the "uncanny in being at once familiar and unfamiliar." (Shapiro 2003: 62) Seen in this light, "[e]verything [ordinary] is – at the least – difficult." (Sontag

1996: 123) It is difficult because nothing in the modern world is definite; understanding should be plural. Things can go in this way and that way at the same time. Connections between passages are not definite but always provisional.

Walking the *longtang* and Benjamin's writings can both be regarded as loitering – an activity which:

tends to blur distinctions on which social order depends – between innocence and guilt, between the good citizen enjoying a moment's respite and the seedy character who may just be taking the sun on this bench or idling in that shady doorway ... The trivial is a category that breaks down social distinctions and hierarchies of all kinds. (Chambers 1999: 8)

"Ambiguity displaces authenticity in all things." (Benjamin, "One Way Street"; quoted in Sontag 1996: 123) Allegorical readings, guided by loitering, help us to appreciate the beauty of the labyrinthine passages in texts and the *longtang* which can never be expressed fully, and can only be revealed in "a fleeting glimmer". To appreciate, rather than to understand the *longtang*, we need to walk, as Barthes does in Japan:

you must orient yourself in [this city] not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing. (Barthes 1983: 36)

Walking in the alleys, one's feet touch the ground. Through touching, traces are left on the touching surfaces like "the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel." (Benjamin 1992: 91) Traces are traces of the past. They constitute memory, and add material and historical thickness to the *longtang*. Then, touching gives a unique and personal attachment to the *longtang*. Through walking, memory (especially the *involuntaire*) is triggered off. This is an irreplaceable experience. Everyone has his/her own personal map constructed by walking (a touching and moving experience in both the physical and psychological senses). This makes concentration, and rational thinking, impossible. A subject is simply wandering in the street and in thought (Benjamin 2008: 40). Then, interestingly, a map is not drawn by concentration, but by distraction. Hence, the strength of walking; such "spatial practice", does not lie in its "competence", but in "improvisation". As Benjamin says, "[a]ll the decisive blows are struck left-handed. ... The power of a country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane." (Benjamin 1986: 65-6) The *longtang* is a tactile space (Shapiro 2003: 67). And thus spatial practice is not about understanding a city in the sense of reducing it to a map in order to control, as with Kublai Kan in Calvino's novel, *Invisible Cities* (Calvino 1997: 135-9).

Walking in the *longtang* involves twists and turns. Each turning puts the walker into the *longtang*'s rhythm, like reading a poem. If reading/walking in it slowly, patiently, and aimlessly, meanings are unfolded accidentally, and its rhythm is enjoyed. This is the "rhythmical bliss of unrolling the thread" (Benjamin 1986:

142) in the labyrinths. Then the rhythm of the *longtang* which involves “interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy” (Lefebvre 2004: 15) is felt. “The impenetrability of the everyday and the everyday character of the impenetrable” (Benjamin 1986: 190; see also Shapiro 2003: 71-72) can be revealed. This is “a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration” (Benjamin 1986: 179). It is in such a way that the joy of ordinary life in the *longtang* is discovered. A structural map shows us a city in a systematic way, but cannot let us feel the rhythm of the *longtang* which cannot be drawn onto a map. It overflows it.

Reading/walking is like dancing with signs.<sup>4</sup> To do so requires dwelling in it. In Barthes’ words, “[T]he city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it.” (Barthes 1997: 168) Reading is the same. “You did not read books through; you dwelt, abided between their lines.” (Sontag 1996: 125) The *longtang* is “against interpretation” (Sontag 1996: 122) which is an attempt to control; meaning/beauty refuse to reveal to themselves. “Truth ... resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession.” (Benjamin 1996: 29) If the *longtang* is a liberating labyrinth, to borrow from Borges (an Argentine writer who writes in the short story, “Death and the Compass”: “I know of one Greek labyrinth which is a single straight line.” (Borges 1970: 117)), boulevards are labyrinths which are phantasmagoric and totalitarian.

In a word, walking, as a spatial practice, is intimate to the living place, and hence, anthropological. It is literary through “writing” aesthetic value into city as allegory. It is also political by acting in opposition to the dominance of the linear conception of modern time over space. Straying in space facilitates straying in time (Demetz 1986: xviii). Benjamin says, “For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities.” (Benjamin 1986: 28) During such spatial practice, space wins over the modern conception of time, and restores the heterogeneity of time repressed by it (Benjamin 1986: xvii); and a loiterer constitutes the modern hero. Susan Sontag puts it nicely:

In time, one is only what one is: what one has always been. In space, one can be another person. ... Time does not give one much leeway: it thrusts us forward from behind, blows us through the narrow funnel of the present to the future. But space is broad, teeming with possibilities, positions, intersections, passages, detours, U-turns, dead ends, one-way streets. (Sontag 1996: 116-7)

### **The Attraction of Elusive Ordinarity**

She was not merely another woman captured by his lens, for she had an added significance that eluded the grasp of his camera. Actually, Mr. Cheng didn’t want to grasp anything. He felt he had lost something – something deep inside – and he needed to get it back. (Wang 2008: 80)

To the photographer Mr. Cheng Wang’s ordinariness at first meant that it “was hard for him to get inspired” (Wang 2008: 80). Later, he is fascinated by the ex-

traordinariness of the ordinary. Nevertheless, the camera does not enable him to see more by ‘close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus ...’ (Benjamin 1992: 229<sup>5</sup>). “Even when he was finally finished, he still felt as if there was so much more to capture on film.” (Wang 2008: 80) “...[A]fter each photo he seemed to discover something new about her. With each shot there was something more to explore, and so he took shot after shot, completely enchanted by what he saw. Instead of fascinated by his camera, he ‘feel[s] disappointed by [it].’” (ibid. 80) “All it could capture was the ‘here and now’; it was helpless when it came to capturing that ‘lingering impression’” (ibid. 80). Mr. Cheng does not want to see what was presented in the photo, but uses it to trace back the “lingering impression” which lies *before* the moment that the camera can capture. His conception of photography helps us to acquire the ability of “historical awakening” by reading images dialectically.

The girl in the picture was not beautiful, but she was pretty. Beauty ... implies rejection ... Prettiness ... hints at a kind of intimate understanding. ... Wang Qiyao reached down into the bottom of your heart. ... Yet though the image failed to linger in your mind, you were bound to remember liking it the next time you laid eyes on it. It was the kind of photo you could never get sick of, yet by no means something you could not do without. The photo and the name of the magazine were a match made in heaven, the photo acting like a footnote to the name. After all, what was *Shanghai Life* but fashion, food, and being attentive to all the details of the everyday? The image of Wang Qiyao seemed to capture the essence of all of this ... (ibid. 42-3)

Wang Qiyao earns the designation, the “Proper Young Lady of Shanghai”, because of her ordinary photo which she does not like, and, above all, is “a bit confused as to when exactly that photo [was] taken” (ibid. 43). This is selected as the inside front cover of a magazine called *Shanghai Life* her copy of which she hides under her pillow. The photo selected is of

Wang Qiyao wearing one of her casual *cheongsams* with a flowered pattern. She was sitting on a stone stool beside a stone table, her face turned slightly to one side, in a “listening pose”, as if chatting with someone outside the camera’s frame. (ibid. 42)

It is such prettiness that Mr. Cheng is enchanted by her in a photo shoot. Her prettiness communicates with the people outside the frame in an intimate way. This is the secret of the ordinary expressed on surface. Siegfried Kracauer can help at this point. He says,

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch’s judgments about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally. (Kracauer 1995: 75)

Wang Qiyao's photo shows her as an ordinary girl in the inconspicuous setting of *longtang* life, a life overlooked and overshadowed by the grand narrative which is the "epoch's judgment", framing Shanghai as an inauthentic replica of the "Paris of the Orient". Yet this expressive detail illuminates this epochal judgment, brings it into question, undermines its definitive status as judgment, and opens up possibilities of re-reading its pasts and futures.

The *longtang* resist a single reading. "Gossip is yet another landscape in the Shanghai *longtang* – you can almost see it as it sneaks out through the rear windows and the back doors." (Wang 2008: 7) "It has nothing to do with things like 'history', not even 'unofficial history': we can only call it gossip." (ibid. 7) Shanghai's vitality is constituted by her heterogeneous gossip into which the "self" is embedded (ibid. 12). As the narrator of the novel says,

The people in Shanghai's *longtang* neighborhoods ... don't want to create a place for themselves in history: they want to create themselves. Without being ambitious, they expend every ounce of what strength they have. ... Everyone has his fair share. (ibid. 13)

Nobody's account of Shanghai can claim absolute legitimacy. "In the world of rumor, fact cannot be separated from fiction; there is truth within lies, and lies within the truth." (ibid. 8) (Ruan is too insistent on separating truth from lies.) The fascination of the Shanghai *longtang*, built on gossip, is the fact that the *longtang* are made of fragments which can never succumb to a grand narrative. No single piece of gossip can substitute for the others. Each has a value of its own (Rosen 1991, 155). Viewed from the *longtang* rooftops, we can see a "majestic sight pieced together from countless minute fragments, an immense power born of immeasurable patience." (Wang 2008:8)

Such a myriad fragmented "majestic sight" is hidden behind the master-narrative of "the Paris of the Orient". This can be seen in the relationship between the *longtang* and streets and buildings (or boulevards) emerging around them.

Streets and buildings emerge around [the *longtang*] in a series of dots and lines, like the subtle brushstrokes that bring life to the empty expanses of white paper in a traditional Chinese landscape painting. As day turns into night and the city lights up, these dots and lines begin to glimmer. However, underneath the glitter lies an immense blanket of darkness – these are the *longtang* of Shanghai. ... Against this decades-old backdrop of darkness, the Paris of the Orient unfolds her splendor. (ibid. 3)

### III Dreaming and Awakening in Shanghai

Wang's film audition is unsuccessful because of her ordinariness (ibid. 38). Her life, as well as the novel, do not begin with the film studio but with the *longtang*. However, the dream of becoming a celebrity and living a modern life still circulates within the traditional rooms in which Wang and every other ordinary Shanghai girl live. Being dressed in *cheongsams* of indigo blue (the colour of melancholy), "[t]he fine clothes in the store window call out to them, the famous stars on the

silver screen call out to them ...” (ibid. 16) The only responses to these calls are melancholic bedroom dreams. “Their bodies may be sitting in the bedchamber, but their hearts and minds are somewhere else.” (ibid. 16) The *longtang* are left desolate day and night, full of physically present but mentally absent Shanghai girls. Shanghai in the 1940s, as represented by these girls, is a city of melancholy.

### The Mirror Image

Melancholy suggests that Wang, compared with a celebrity, is an incomplete/fragmented figure precisely because of her ordinariness. A by-line, a “designation”, she thinks, can compose a perfect image for her, and release her from her melancholic dream. As the narrator comments, “[s]he was not a celebrity of the screen or stage, nor a wellborn woman from an influential family, nor a femme fatale capable of bringing down an empire; but if she wanted to take her place on society’s stage she would need a designation.” (ibid. 44-5) The designation, “A Proper Young Lady of Shanghai”, is gained after her becoming an inside-front cover girl in *Shanghai Life*. It:

told everyone in the city that ... they were all on the road to glory. ... The title “A Proper Young Lady of Shanghai” made one think of “the moon rising above the city on the sea” – the sea is the sea of people and the moon lighting up the night sky is everybody’s moon. (ibid. 45)

The phrase “city on the sea” refers to Shanghai (the word *shang* in Chinese, means “above”; and *hai* “sea”). Like “the moon rising above the city on the sea”, every Shanghai girl can become a legend of the ordinary. Nevertheless, the moon receives her glamour from the sunlight, the patriarchal light; in other words, it is only by following the instructions set by patriarchy that a girl can become Cinderella. Such an ordinary legend is possible only if she behaves or *performs* properly on the social *stage*. To sum up in a Lacanian language, Wang Qiyao, perceiving herself having a “fragmented” body, and needs an “orthopedic” designation as an “armor of an alienating identity” (Lacan 2006: 78) in order not to get drowned in the sea and become nobody.

Later, she receives an invitation from a photo salon. She “felt the intense warmth of the camera lights shining down on her body .... Surrounding her was darkness, and she was the only soul in that world of darkness.” (Wang 2008: 46) She rises, as if from the (mirror) stage, under the spotlights.

The picture of her later displayed in the window was even more glamorous because she was elegantly attired in evening dress. But this was a commonplace elegance; ... this pseudo-elegance ... was not meant to deceive. The splendor displayed in the shop window hinted at a dream ready to be fulfilled, a dream belonging to proper young ladies. ... The Wang Qiyao displayed in the shop window had taken the “good girl” side of her ... [I]t suited her taste perfectly and, moreover, provided her with confidence. (ibid. 46)

To get displayed in the window, or on the stage, is to construct a desire in the mirror for the other girls to crave. The joke is that every girl wants to be different by

acting like the other (Baudrillard 2001: 15). This kind of elegance is a vulgar and fake one. Wang identifies herself with the mirror image, “Miss Shanghai”, or the “Proper Young Lady of Shanghai”, with which every Shanghainese girl wants to identify herself.

She and other girls often listen to Zhou Xuan’s “Song of the Four Seasons” in her bedchamber. The song “[counts] out all the beauties between spring and winter to poison and bewitch your mind – because only the nice things are mentioned.” (ibid. 17) She only appropriates this song in order to fall into a dream of vanity. Each generation of Shanghai girls repeats the same dream. It is:

a never-ending cycle, one generation after another. The vestal bedchamber is but a mirage thrown up by the Shanghai *longtang*. When the clouds open to reveal the rising sun, it turns to smoke and mist. The curtain rises and falls, one act follows another, into eternity. (ibid. 17-8)

The identity of the “Proper Young Lady of Shanghai” is however defined only by a patriarchy that lies in “the great sky beyond the stars”, and sets the fate of Wang and all the other *longtang* daughters:

Win or lose, she seemed to be in control of her own destiny – but not entirely. That belongs to the great sky beyond the stars, looming over the Shanghai nightline and enveloping the entire city. ... [T]his corner of the sky is obscured by buildings and city lights, which serve as its camouflage, yet it withstands thunder and lightning and all the chaos of the world, eternally and boundlessly stretched out overhead. (ibid. 55)

Wang Qiyao is taught to behave as the “Proper Young Lady of Shanghai”, and to be blind to other factors which constitute her prettiness (they are recognized by Mr. Cheng instead). The mistake she commits is her inability to see the fact that she is not free to see what she wants to see, and to choose an identity she wants to. In other words, she is defined by what she is not. She misrecognizes the Lacanian mirror as a transparent mirror, and the social stage as a life-transforming one. She is alienated by the mirror image, and enjoys being trapped in it. She does not realize that the designation is an imprisonment (instead of an “armour” which composes a perfect identity for her). Therefore, she does not take heed of the director’s advice that: “[T]he ‘Miss Shanghai’ crown is but a floating cloud. ... [T]here is nothing emptier than that – *that* is what you’d call vanity ...” (ibid. 68) She, as the narrator describes, is a sparrow who cannot fly high to see the invisible power of the dominant ideology, let alone challenge it. She is “without wisdom, the most vulgar of [birds]” (ibid. 20).

The Miss Shanghai Beauty Competition reflects the power of ideology in a more profound way than a political election; or a beauty election is more political than a political election.

“Shanghai” was already a virtual synonym for modernity, but “Miss Shanghai” captured even better the modern cosmopolitanism of the city ... People paid more attention to the election of their beauty queen than the election of their mayor ... (ibid. 55)

The dominant ideology governing *Shanghai modern* in the 1940s is, to follow

Lefebvre, concretely manifested in the Miss Shanghai Beauty Competition. The more the girls think themselves as being free to change their fate through such competitions, the more powerfully the ideology remains in place.

At least half of the splendor of Shanghai was built on [Shanghai girls'] desire for fame and wealth; if not for this desire, more than half the stores in the city would have long gone under. ... The city is like one big goddess, wearing clothes plumed with rainbows, scattering silver and gold across the sky. The colored clouds are the sleeves of her gown. (ibid. 60-1)

## Historical Awakening

Every epoch not only dreams the next, but while dreaming impels it towards wakefulness. (Benjamin 1997: 176)

When Shanghai constructs Wang Qiyao, the former is constructed in a similar way. The city also needs the designation, the "Paris of the Orient". In his writings on 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris Benjamin comments on the World Exhibitions that they were "places of pilgrimage to the fetish commodity." (Benjamin 1997: 165) When the 1967 World Exhibition was held in Paris, for Benjamin it "was confirmed in its position as the capital of luxury and of fashion." (Benjamin 1997: 166) This was not a compliment; the last sentence of his essay, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" reads: "With the upheaval of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled." (Benjamin 1997: 176) In this sense, driven by the commodifications of capitalist modernity, Paris succumbed to the fetishism and alienation of the Lacanian mirror:

The world exhibitions glorified the exchange value of commodities. They created a framework in which their use-value receded into the background. They opened up a phantasmagoria into which people entered in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry made that easier for them by lifting them to the level of the commodity. They yielded to its manipulations while enjoying their alienation from themselves and from others. (Benjamin 1997: 165)

How might Wang's own dreaming impel her epoch "towards wakefulness"?

When she was a young girl who could not "yet completely distinguish truth from fiction and the real from the make-believe" (Wang 2008: 34), she thinks that the camera can return the dead to life, and has "the power to make what was dark and dismal glimmer with light." To her, "inside the camera was a different world." (ibid. 34) It is like a kaleidoscope. The image, a cultural commodity, to her, is like a dream image. She is "intoxicated" (Shapiro 2003) by the camera image. She thinks that the film teaches her the essence of life in the 1940s (Wang 2008: 34).

Although she cannot be a film star, she treats the whole city as a studio, a "site of intoxication" (Shapiro 2003: 59), and as a stage for her to perform "when movies had already become an important part of her everyday life" (Wang 2008: 34) "Strings of celebratory firecrackers continued to sound as the neon light reflected in the window turned from red to orange and from green to blue. How raucous and colorful were those Shanghai nights." (ibid. 69) This is the phantasmagoric

Shanghai to which she is tragically attracted. The film studio, to her, is the microcosm of Shanghai; and Shanghai is like a “cinematic city” (Clarke 1997) saturated with moving/phantasmagoric images. Wang dreams her celebrity dreams in the phantasmagoric world. Glamour, reflected in a kaleidoscopic Shanghai made of fragmented mirrors, distracts Wang from seeing its ruinous nature.

Wang realizes her tragedy when she is killed. The city to her is still like a large film studio even on the verge of her death; however, her final interpretation is different. She realizes that everything is imprisoned on the silkscreen, or in the phantasmagoric mirror. When she realizes that the mirror is broken, and after waking up from her long dream, instead of seeing light she finally sees darkness. Instead of seeing life, she finally sees her living death happening at the very beginning, not the end, of the novel.

“[T]he hanging lamp swinging back and forth” (ibid. 429): the last image caught in Wang Qiyao’s eyes before her death. This image conjures up the image of a dying woman she saw in a film studio forty years ago. Instead of simply what the image “is”, the image also shows what it originally “was”, and what it is “not”. The film-like image is ambiguous. On this, Benjamin writes, “Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill.” (Benjamin 1999: 171) Such filmic/dream-like images are dialectical. It is both the murdered actress and Wang, life and death, inanimate and animate, ordinary and extraordinary, past and present, use value and exchange value, totality and fragment, dream and reality, waking and dreaming, alienation and liberation, as well as politics and beauty.

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. (Benjamin 2002: 463)

On the contrary, the intoxication of the phantasmagoric image represses this dialectical possibility. “An image then does not make things appear ‘as they really are’. It is exactly appearance, constructed inevitably by ideology and desire, that needs to be questioned.” (Abbas 1989: 54) Reading the image dialectically gains access to “the unconscious of modernity” (Abbas 1989: 54), and provides “unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things”. No wonder the image Wang first saw in the film studio gave her a “powerful sense of *déjà vu*” (Wang 2008: 31). The image she first saw put her in a waking dream, a dream in real life; the very same image she sees at the last “impels her towards wakefulness” dialectically and critically: the woman she first saw in the film studio is her. Her dream ends; her life ends too. “With the upheaval of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.” (176)

## Towards Modernity

The realization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking. For this reason dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. (Benjamin 2002: 464)

Is Shanghai modern enough? The fascination of modern city life is its unpredictability. In his reading of Marx, Marshall Berman writes:

Modern men and women must learn to yearn for change ... They must learn not to long nostalgically for the “fixed, fast-frozen relationships” of the real or fantasized past, but to delight in mobility, to thrive on renewal, to look forward to future developments in their conditions of life and their relations with their fellow men. (Berman 1988: 95-6)

For Berman, Marx appreciates the bourgeois achievement of “[liberating] the human capacity and drive for development: for permanent change, for perpetual upheaval and renewal in every mode of personal and social life.” (Berman 1988: 94) However, for Marx, “the bourgeoisie is forced to close itself off from its richest possibilities” and “the only activity that really means anything to its members is making money ...”(Berman 1988: 93) The Crystal Palace, as the venue for London World Exhibition in 1851, manifests “modernization as a human adventure.” (Berman 1988: 245) Shanghai’s World Expo is not modern in the Marxist sense; it is closed off from change and focused on making money. The sense of perpetual overcoming, the spirit of modernity, is lacking. In re-animating *Shanghai modern* as a narrative resource for its break-neck development, Abbas’ “back to the future”, has the city become trapped in its past, or rather, in its inability to re-read its past in a critical and dialectical way?

## IV The Myth of the Ordinary

When she was young in the 1940s, Wang sacrifices Mr. Cheng’s ordinary love for a modern social life. To Wang Qiyao, Mr. Cheng’s *longtang* life does not change with the change of regime from the 1940s to the 1960s (Wang 2008: 233). She has a nostalgic illusion that there is always an unchanging home waiting for her. To her surprise, Mr. Cheng finally leaves her. When both the ordinary (home) and the modern party life in the 40s are gone, Wang feels the Saturnic nature of time in the 1960s. The concept of the unchanging *longtang* is only a mythical veil covering that mis-understood past which Wang has foregone. Ironically, ordinary things now turn out to be mythical. Wang Anyi writes:

This city drains away how many experiences and changes. Although they cannot be included in history books, and remain idle talk in the streets and lanes, if we miss these, something cannot be well explained. ... This is what the historical myth of Shanghai means. In fact, every day is an ordinary day. ... Looking back, it becomes mythical. (Wang 2002: 203; translation is mine)

Wang Anyi may echo what Appadurai in saying that “locality is materially produced”; otherwise, a sense of rootlessness is the result. To her, Shanghai is ordi-

narly concrete to an extent that it is sometimes merely a kind of face, an accent, a scent. For instance, there is a kind of face which can bring back her memory of a particular street. To her, “Shanghai” no longer exists in contemporary Shanghai. Different kinds of facial expression can no longer be found in its streets. They become homogeneous, and cannot trigger off her senses. She can only look for Shanghai in concepts. Interestingly, when she was in Hong Kong in the 1980s, looking at the harbor, she was thinking of Shanghai (the city on the sea), and thinks back to the book she once read, an account of the Shanghai-myth. At this moment, an illusionary but spectacular image pops up in her mind: Shanghai is rising from the sea gradually. Attempting to read closer, the vision is blurred (Wang 2002: 6-21). The ordinary eludes our grasp as it becomes myth; the city is then given over to melancholy.

The original *longtang* are disappearing while Wang Qiyao is searching for her celebrity life (Abbas 1997). She then comes to miss the *longtang* life but what remains is only her nostalgic imagination of the absent life she failed to recognize at the time. How might she come to recognize the myth of an (absent) origin and set herself free from nostalgia? We might glimpse some clues through the film *I Wish I Knew*.

Both the English and Chinese titles – *Hai Shang Chuan Qi*, literally means “the legend (*chuan qi*) above (*shang*) the sea (*hai*)” – resonate with *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. In both, successive generations miss the chance of understanding Shanghai in frantic search for a modern Shanghai. *I wish I Knew* evokes the “old, ordinary Shanghai”: but its narration gradually uncovers its mythological construction. The mythical origin is empty, an artificial creation.

The film consists of a series of interviews about Shanghai. Most of the interviewees are descendants of legendary figures such as Barbara Fei (Fei Mu’s daughter), Du Mei Ru (Du Yuesheng’s daughter), and so on. The interviews concern the interpretations of these legendary figures of Old Shanghai.<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Pan’s interview is incomplete because she can’t help crying when narrating the past, and the interview cannot continue. Her recollections seems to be very realistic; however, Pan left Shanghai for Hong Kong at a young age soon after the war. The Shanghai she interprets may be only the product of her imagination. The song heard near the end of the interview further lends it a mythical character. The ancestors of the interviewees are not politicians, lawyers, or other respectable professions but the mythical figures of gangsters, filmmakers, singers and so on not officially endorsed by official histories. Their accounts of Shanghai have a mythical colour; but we only have these accounts through their descendants’ own interpretations. None of the interviews are complete, each begins and ends suddenly. The links between the interviews seems as random as the *longtang*. The film is a fragmented collection of interviews, leaving gaps which can only be filled by the imagination. The Old Shanghai is always under construction.

Interestingly enough, such interviews are linked by a fictive story in which the only character in the film, Zhao Tao, is in search of her love in Shanghai. The “realistic” elements in the interviews are connected by the “fictive” story, yet we do not know if her search succeeds. It exists in fragments too. A real artist, Zhao Tao, acts as a fictive character with her real name. Or, the artist actually acts herself. Or, the fictive character recalls her lost experience (then the character acts the artist). Or, the real artist romanticizes her “real” experience in order to act the fictive character (the artist acts herself through the fictive character). The interaction between the fictive character and the real artist never ends. It is difficult to distinguish the Zhao Tao as a film artist, or the Zhao Tao as a fictive character. It is also impossible to know if such fictive love is more real than the love expressed in the interviews.

In the film, a myth “exists” not because it is not true but because it blurs the distinction between truth and falsity, between past and future. The future is burdened with the past; and the past is a myth awaiting construction. “I wish I knew” what Shanghai was, is, and will be is an impossible wish. It brings an “everlasting sorrow” to Wang Qiyao and Ruan Lingyu because they cannot understand that the myth is constructed; they want to become mythical. Recognizing it precisely as myth allows us to step beyond this reactionary, nostalgic reading of the past.

### **A Wang Qiyao to Come**

“The Paris of the Orient” may be the title of a novel of Shanghai for the rich and the powerful who can only expect the phantasmagoric extraordinary. Wang Anyi’s *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is a novel of the voyage of Wang Qiyao in Shanghai, the legend of the sea, from the 1940s to the 1980s. It is about how Wang and Shanghai survive. Mr Cheng’s photography series of Wang Qiyao attempts to identify a “lingering impression”, a moment in the past whose meaning eluded both him and her at the time. The Wang he desires always eludes his camera. The Wangs captured on the photographs always disappoint him. Mr. Cheng’s “book” on Wang is an unfinished book, a series of photographs showing that “there was something more to explore” (Wang 2008: 80). His never-ending work is patiently in search of extraordinary ordinariness. It pushes him to take more pictures, and drives him away from melancholy.

Mr. Cheng’s “tale” of Wang is a “writing” of that which the novel cannot reach. It seems to serve no purpose, never managing to grasp anything; it seeks only that “lingering impression” which eludes it and spurs him on. It points to an ordinary moment which was not recognized for what it was at the time. Rather than a complete myth of the past “[I]t presents a trace, a displacement of experience” (Abbas 1989: 54). Mr. Cheng’s photo-taking opens up a space for a different encounter with the past.

In *Center Stage*, there are some remade scenes from Ruan’s films (copies of some of them no longer exist). “These scenes ... filmed in color are then juxtaposed

posed with the performances by Ruan preserved in black and white prints.” (Abbas 1997: 47) Abbas says,

... *Ruan Lingyu is her acting*. It is not a question, therefore, of looking for a person behind the acting or conversely of identifying the person with the dramatic roles: these are merely the most pathetic of fallacies, responsible for creating legend and gossip, turning an actress into a ghost. Rather, it is a way of representing the ghost as an actress. (Abbas 1997: 47)

*Center Stage* does not offer a better understanding of Ruan. On stage, only the ghost can be seen. It is impossible, in the film, to “see” Ruan, her ghost, the film industry in Shanghai in the 1930s, and Shanghai. Instead of reading the film as the biography of Ruan, it is more about “the investigation of a legend” (Abbas 1997: 45), or the impossibility of understanding any legend. The validity of what has been captured in the film is constantly challenged. The director who is supposed to be outside the film is seen and heard as a character in *Center Stage* questioning who Ruan was. Maggie Cheung, the actress playing Ruan, appears as both herself, Ruan, and Ruan in her films. She is as complicated as Zhao Tao in *I Wish I Knew*. If the film is “a quasi-documentary” of Ruan, at the same time it contains a “fictional film narrative.” (Abbas 1997: 46) The investigation of Ruan’s legend is similar to Jia’s investigation of Shanghai’s legends. What appears center stage is a legend with a ghostly appearance.

The past does not exist in nostalgia, but in “unbridled imagination” (Wang 2008: 12). The fascination of Shanghai is not due to the fact that her future is not known but to the fact that her past can never be approached. Shanghai’s futures depend upon an affirmative reading of the past Shanghai, instead of a nostalgic reading which closes off “unbridled imagination”.

Mr. Cheng understands Benjamin’s warning: “[f]or every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.” (Benjamin 1992: 247) He devotes his life to approach in photography the last moment of Wang’s ordinariness when he understands that this Wang is soon to disappear. He appreciates the transience of the ordinary Wang, and tries to rescue it for eternity; what is captured can only allegorically point to a misrecognised, unredeemed past. This does not put him in a melancholic position. Each picture gives him a “lingering impression” of the ordinary Wang. This gives him “unbridled imagination”, and drives him to take more pictures. To him, photographing Wang helps him re-read the missing past. The “dialectical image” gives him unlimited possibilities of re-reading the past, and leads to unlimited futures. When Wang becomes the “Proper Lady of Shanghai”, the ordinary Wang “dies”. After seeing each photo he took with the past ordinary Wang, he still “discovers something new about her.” (Wang 2008: 80) However, he can no longer take pictures of her. The ordinary Wang dies and he gives up his book. His subsequent reaction to Wang’s pictures thus recalls Barthes’ reaction to those of his youthful mother in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1993) – they are photographs “without future”. Has Shanghai now misrecognised its past so completely for it to

disappear completely? Has its reworking of the nostalgic myth of Old Shanghai erased the redemptive possibilities of its “lingering impressions”? Or do other pasts now have to come into play if the ersatz modernity of contemporary Shanghai – this modernity as ruin – is not to be closed off but redeem modernity’s promise of the “unbridled imagination”?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Page references to this novel are put in the main text. The title of the original Chinese version does not carry a subtitle.
- <sup>2</sup> Wang Anyi (2002) says, “To write Shanghai, the best representative is woman.” (89) The English translation is mine.
- <sup>3</sup> On the importance of re-reading, Roland Barthes (1974) says, “... [T]hose who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere ...” (16); see also Italo Calvino (1999).
- <sup>4</sup> Nietzsche says, “For one cannot subtract dancing in every form from a noble education – to be able to dance with one’s feet, with concepts, with words: need I still add that one must be able to do it with the pen too – that one must learn to *write*?” See Friedrich Nietzsche 1976: 512-3.
- <sup>5</sup> It is important to note that he discusses film, instead of photography.
- <sup>6</sup> Montaigne says, “We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things.” Quoted in Derrida 1978: 278.

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