Writing the longtang way of life

The collective infatuation with colonial Shanghai – referred to as ‘Shanghai nostalgia’ in Chinese cultural discourse – sprang up in the mid-1990s when the city witnessed an explosion of destruction and renewal. Searching for a Shanghai identity in the midst of brutal transformation, Shanghai writers resorted, en masse, to this distinctive period in Chinese history. After being presented as the epitome of evil in the Maoist period, colonial Shanghai now reconquered its original representation of Western-style urban modernity. The typical Shanghai longtang – built in the colonial period and characterised by a unique mixture of Chinese and Western architecture – has become one of the main symbols, featuring recurrently in contemporary Shanghai fiction, of which Song of Everlasting Sorrow is one of the most representative examples.

Song of Everlasting Sorrow
Wang Anyi’s novel borrows its title from a narrative poem by Bai Juyi (CE 772-846) about the tragic love story between Tang emperor Xuanzong and his most beautiful concubine Yang Guifei. Being madly in love, the emperor neglects his state affairs until he has to flee because of an armed rebellion. His royal guards blame Yang Guifei and force the emperor to have her executed. The poem closes with Xuanzong’s lamenting words: ‘While even heaven and earth will one day come to an end, this everlasting sorrow shall endure.’

The novel Song of Everlasting Sorrow also ends in the murder of a tragic beauty, the ageing Qiyao whose life reflects Shanghai’s turbulent history. As though she is just one of the diverse elements that constitute a longtang neighbourhood, Wang Anyi only introduces Qiyao after four chapters of detailed description of the longtang setting. She embodies the ‘girlish longtang spirit’.

Behind every doorway in the Shanghai longtang a Wang Qiyao is studying, embroidery, whispering secrets to her sisters, or throwing a tearful tantrum at her parents.

Through Wang Anyi’s words, the protagonist of the novel seems to become the longtang itself, or, in the words of the Chinese journal Writer: ‘the city’s alleys, the city’s atmosphere, the city’s thought and spirit.’

While the timeframe of the three parts of Song of Everlasting Sorrow corresponds to the political periods of pre-Mao, Mao, and post-Mao China, it is not a historical novel in the strict sense. History and politics play their part behind the scenes, leaving their traces in Wang Qiyao’s life story. But what is most striking about the novel is how historical events are mirrored in the changing physical appearance of the longtang, that originated in the glorious days of cosmopolitan Shanghai.

First to appear are the dormer windows protruding from the roof tiles [the garret above the kitchen in longtang, this often rented out to struggling young writers and lent its name to a popular literary genre as a result] of those traditional longtang buildings, showing themselves off with a certain self-conscious delicacy; the wooden shutters are carefully delineated, the handmade rooftop tiles are arranged with precision, even the potted roses on the windowsills have been cared for painstakingly.

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Shanghai:

but also planted the seeds of her ambivalent relationship with a society that disparagingly labelled her as ‘new Shanghainese’:

quick-witted, and sharp, at times appearing to think out loud and until the interviewer interrupts her for the next. She is open,

After each question, Wang Anyi vigorously keeps on talking

main subject of this interview: the city of Shanghai. Explaining

writing stories that belonged to the so-called ‘roots-seeking

particular, her early works deal with these experiences during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), after which she started

story. For example, in my short story ‘The Street’, the street itself

is actually the only character and forms the whole plot; I describe

Male authors mainly write about major events in society.

Note

Wang Anyi (b.1954) is the author of numerous volumes of essays, short stories, and novels, which are gaining

her increasing recognition around the world, ranging from China’s highest literary honour, the Mao Dun Prize (for Song of Everlasting Sorrows), to the Los Angeles Times Book of the Year Award (for which Bout worm was a finalist). Currently Ms Wang is the Chairperson of the Shanghai Writers’ Association, and a professor of Chinese literature at Fudan University.

This interview took place during ‘Shanghai Week’, a festival organised by the city of Rotterdam in honour of the 30th anniversary of the Shanghai-Rotterdam sister city relationship and the Shanghai World Expo 2010. If you are interested in the full interview, please contact the author. With thanks to Nan Su (Dutch Sino Business Promotions) for her kind help with the translation.

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my friends and classmates were all Shanghainese, and our family has moved around town. I guess I have a very tense relation with this city: I feel distant and close to it at the same time. I don’t like the city, but I have no choice but to like it. My relationship with Shanghai has been probably best expressed by the Chinese idiom: ‘the bones are broken, but the muscles still hold them together’.

The most important obstacle between Wang Anyi and the city appears to be the local language. Several times, Ms Wang brings up the consequences of her ongoing struggle to master Shanghaiese (a northern Wu dialect that is less than 50 per cent intelligible for speakers of Mandarin, the national standard language):

Since I couldn’t speak Shanghaiese as a child, I was always very nervous when I had to say something in public and afraid people wouldn’t have the patience to listen to me. So in the end, I would usually just give up the right to speak and, in order to compensate for that, mainly talk to myself: for me, writing is just like talking to myself: the process of writing begins when I feel like I’m talking too much to myself; then I just have to write it down until it becomes a novel.

The story reveals how Wang Anyi continuously relates her position as a ‘new Shanghaiese’ to her writing profession, reminding us of the best-selling author Chen Danyan (often grouped with Wang Anyi and Cheng Nashan for their ‘nostalgic, novel’ on Shanghai), who also moved to the city as a young child and frequently emphasises how her ‘outsider’s perspec-

tive’, as she puts it in an interview, ‘helped her to detect many subtle things ignored and taken for granted by local Shanghaiese’. It is precisely this distance that turns them into good observers, as Ms Wang modestly explains:

I haven’t experienced much, so most of my stories come from my imagination. Actually, you can call me a little boring or a coward with regard to life. I do have passions and I like to watch other people’s lives. I’m not a reader but a spectator, observing the lives of others and even the most trivial things. When young people aspiring to become a writer ask for advice, I always tell them that the main talent of a writer is to observe.

A talent that Wang Anyi attributes particularly to women: not only because they ‘have a great capacity for strong emotions’ as ‘emotional beings’, but also, again, because of their ‘outsider’s perspective’.

Male authors mainly write about major events in society.

Even when they write about personal feelings, it is always related to these issues. Works by female authors have their own characteristics: we prefer to write about daily life. Why do people like Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) so much? I think it’s because she writes about the common people. This is why I personally prefer to read works by female authors. Even in the most boring stories you can still take pleasure in their great ability for description; they portray details that only women notice. Maybe it’s even because society has been male-dominated for such a long time, and women have been kept outside, that we have had the opportunity for self-searching.

As soon as the gender issue comes up, Ms Wang’s eyes light up and her voice becomes excited. While passionately championing women’s writing, Wang Anyi is also very critical. Straightening her back, she ventures:

If we talk about women’s rights today, I believe we have accomplished a lot. However, I do feel that when we look at it from the perspective of the emotions, we are still quite primitive: it’s like we are not yet fully evolved, as if we’re still dragging a tail, a tail of emotions. When a woman is the protagonist of a story, she is mostly completely independent, she has everything, she can do anything, and yet she is still yearning for love, searching for true love. So actually, not much has changed in this perspective. We are still living in the age of Jane Austen, we’re still not so developed and still predominantly looking for a good marriage.

The evening ends with a question from the audience about Wang Anyi’s most influential novel, Song of Everlasting Sorrows, a story that follows the adventures of a Shanghai woman from when she participated in a Miss Shanghai contest in the 1940s until her tragic death in the 1980s. The English translation carries the subtitle ‘A Novel of Shanghai’, revealing that it is actually the history of Shanghai that is being portrayed through the life story of the protagonist, a woman of course:

I don’t dare to say that the protagonist Wang Qiyao represents the city, because if I would say that, readers might point out qualities that are missing. But I did try to keep many characteristics of the protagonist resonant with the city. For example, Wang Qiyao is from a common background, born in a common family, which is just like Shanghai. In China, Shanghai is a relatively mature society consisting of an urban middle class that barely inherited anything from the past, but had to start from scratch, on its own and without being too ambitious. So the city and its people take it one step at a time. What I like about Wang Qiyao, and what is also true for the city, is that although she is very pretty and tender, she is a strong woman at heart. She doesn’t care about her duties according to the social norms, but pursues things despised by contemporary values, which is why she is always defeated. But of course, Shanghai is a much stronger women and it is developing into a metropolis. So, I can’t say Wang Qiyao is a representative of Shanghai, then she is like Boston key on the wall of an old Shanghai building: a beautiful decoration of the city.

Lena Scheen

‘My relations with Shanghai are tense’

An interview with Wang Anyi

When Wang Anyi was only one year old, she moved to Shanghai with her mother, the well-reputed Hu Ziyuan. Today, Wang Anyi herself is, arguably, the most influential writer of Shanghai and her stories consistently use the city as a backdrop. Yet in a recent public interview, Wang Anyi confessed that she ‘doesn’t feel Shanghaiese’, though she added, ‘but, neither can I say that I’m not Shanghainese, because if I’m not, then where am I from?’ Ms Wang sits on the stage, wearing an ankle-length skirt and a long shawl draped around her shoulders. Her lively eyes scan the audience with curiosity. Sitting up straight, hair pinned back, feet placed firmly on the ground, hands delicately placed on her knees, she exudes the air of both a distinguished writer and of a down-to-earth peasant woman, an intriguing paradox that she shares with several other mainland Chinese intellectuals.

It is not difficult to picture Ms Wang 40 years ago, when most ‘urban youths’ were sent to the countryside for ‘re-education’ by the peasants; a young girl with rosy cheeks and braided hair, most likely wearing union cotton-padded clothes while swimming revolutionary songs to the violin and, later, to Chairman Mao. In particular, her early work deals with these experiences during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), after which she started writing stories that belonged to the so-called ‘roots-seeking literature’: a literature that explored traditional Chinese customs and values still present in the countryside. However, since the 1990s her work has turned increasingly towards the main subjects of this interview: the city of Shanghai. Explaining this shift in her work, Wang says:

Although my work from before the 1990s does not limit itself to the countryside, the city did indeed play a vague role. It was always in the background of the plot. At that time, my work focused on the characters, their emotions, and how they grow in the story. Shanghai is the place where I live and I think people are usually not so conscious of their own living environment.

So that’s probably also the reason that when I wrote stories set in Shanghai, I didn’t really reflect on the place where the characters where living. Since the 1990s, though my work still focused on rural and urban experience, the city became more concrete, and sometimes even the main character of a story. For example, in my short story ‘The Street’, the street itself is actually the only character and forms the whole plot; I describe the houses, the cars, the people, but the people remain nameless.

Although I am very critical of this story – I think it is rather boring – I still consider it an important turning point in my writing: from now on Shanghai became an important subject in my work.

After each question, Wang Anyi vigorously keeps on talking until the interviewers interrupt her for the next. She is sharp, quick-witted, and sharp, at times appearing to think out loud and she never loses her sense of humour. Holding the audience spellbound, Wang Anyi describes her childhood search for bargains in a society that disparagingly labelled her as ‘new Shanghaiese’:

When my mother and I arrived in Shanghai, we moved into an apartment with a local Shanghai family living above us. They considered our family for many things: our home was too sparsely furnished, we lived too simply and we couldn’t speak Shanghaiese. They were constantly lecturing us and passing judgment. So when I befriended the daughter of this family, my mother had a strong aversion to the locals’ criticisms, she actually admired them as well. I think my mother and I were both intrigued by our neighbours’ lifestyle. They would visit places that were particularly popular with local Shanghaiese, like the Chenghuang Temple and the Great World Entertainment Centre. Our way of life was completely different and going to the cinema was the only fun thing I did with my mother. So from a very young age I have always felt I don’t fit in with the local Shanghai lifestyle.

Wang Anyi’s childhood experiences not only marked her life but also planted the seeds of her ambivalent relationship with Shanghai.

Although I’m living in this city, we don’t blend like milk and water. Sometimes I feel like I’m a spectator watching the city from a distance. Maybe it’s precisely because of this feeling that I can have an objective view of Shanghai. Although this objectivity is, of course, since it’s overshadowed by my own experiences: I have been living here since I was one year old,
This is the décor against which Wang Qiyao’s story begins in 1946, when she is 16 years old, reaching third place in a Miss Shanghai contest. Leading a glamorous life as a model and mistress of Kuomintang officer Li, Qiyao is able to escape her humble background. Her charmed life ends with Li getting killed in a plane crash and Qiyao being left with only a small box of his gold bars.

The second part of the novel, set in the Mao period (1949-1976), finds Qiyao making ends meet as the neighbourhood nurse. Longtang life runs its normal course, seemingly untouched by the political upheaval surrounding it: neighbours and friends meet in Qiyao’s home, eating, drinking, chatting, gossiping, playing mahjong, and having afternoon tea. Since this kind of ‘decadent bourgeoisie’ was basically impossible during the Mao period, one could almost forget this part of the novel is no longer set in colonial Shanghai. In this way, the longtang can be seen as a place of refuge and a space of apolitical resistance.

All this abruptly ends in 1966, when Qiyao’s then lover commits suicide by throwing himself out of a window. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) is largely omitted, which is rather striking for a work that deals with 40 years of Shanghai history – Shanghai is the city where the Cultural Revolution was instigated and experienced its peak. People were restricted in their private lives and many residents were sent to the countryside. It is again through the depiction of the longtang that one can painfully sense the atmosphere of overall devastation.

Longtang alleys of all shapes and sizes ran all over the city, and it was during the summer of 1966 that the red-and-black-dotted rooftops reddened with protruding dormer windows and concrete terraces were all piled open suddenly, their secrets, conciliatory or compromising, damp and mildly-reekingly of rat piss, were in the process of rotting away…

In the final part of Song of Everlasting Sorrow Shanghai embraces the market economy model. Wang Qiyao has more difficulties in adapting than her illegitimate daughter. As a former Miss Shanghai, Qiyao becomes a symbol of the colonial period and attracts a young boy who idolises her because of this. However, he soon realises that his beloved old city and Qiyao are both fading irrevocably away.

The novel ends with Wang Qiyao’s violent death: she is murdered for the one possession that she nostalgically used to keep the past alive – Li’s gold bars, symbols of old Shanghai.

The longtangs of Shanghai have grown gray; there are cracks in the streets and along the walls, the alley lamps have been smashed by mischievous children, the gutters are clogged, and foul water trickles down the streets. Even the leaves of the sweet-scented oleanders are coated with grime.

By depicting the daily lives and ‘trivial’ experiences of ordinary people in the cramped spaces of longtang neighborhoods, Wang Anyi reveals the untold stories of the city, or what Zhang Xudong calls ‘the natural history’ – unofficial histories, intimate life-worlds, and memories – of the city beneath ‘a mechanical, homogenous history.’ The longtang seem to embody the soul or essence of Shanghai culture that has survived in spite of a brutal history, but is now about to vanish.

Amid the forest of new skyscrapers, these old longtang neighborhoods are like a fleet of sunken ships, their bottled hulls exposed as the sea dries up.

What the narrator mourns, seeing the decay of Shanghai’s longtang, is not so much its unique architecture but the Shanghai lifestyle that the typology of these houses made possible. In an interview, Wang Anyi illustrated this poignantly with the following personal story:

“One day I was heading for an appointment, but couldn’t find the place. I suddenly noticed that I had unconsciously entered a typical Shanghai longtang neighbourhood. As I walked on, a deeply familiar feeling overwhelmed me. It was a particular smell, but also a particular sound, a particular temperature… Tears came to my eyes, because these sensations embodied a life that I recognised: my childhood in the longtang neighbourhood, my longtang life when I was a child.”

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