Shanghai as a City of Juxtapositions

According to a variety of texts—from guidebooks and travel accounts to, at least by inference, novels and later films—what made a trip to Shanghai in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries special was the way one encountered there a jumble of people from, and physical elements linked to, various parts of the world. It was, as boosters and travelers both liked to stress, a place of great cultural diversity, where the East and West were juxtaposed in special ways. This sense of the city was conveyed by the images featured on postcards, guidebook covers, and movie posters. It was also communicated by the delicate and detailed line drawings of the local scenes that appeared in the pages of the Dianshizhai, a late nineteenth-century illustrated magazine that, as Rebecca Nedostup and I suggest in a forthcoming part of MIT’s Visualizing Cultures project, was for some Chinese what the Illustrated London News was for many contemporaneous Britons and National Geographic would later be for many Americans.¹

In all these texts, to flag immediately that the place portrayed might be or could only be Shanghai in its incarnation as a subdivided treaty port with both foreign enclaves and Chinese-run districts (the form it took from 1843 until 1943), certain kinds of visuals would be shown. You might see an image of a Chinese junk sailing on the river, passing buildings on the shore that looked as if they would be equally at home in Chicago. Or perhaps a turbaned Sikh policeman guarding the gate to a Western-style park, which would be described elsewhere as a place frequented by Japanese tourists and Chinese amahs watching European children, contained a gazebo where a municipal band with Filipino musicians performed. Or the image might instead feature spectators arriving at the local race course (a kind of venue unknown in China until after the Opium War opened Shanghai and other cities to Western trade and settlement), coming via a mix of conveyances, including palanquins and wheelbarrows (two different Chinese forms of person-powered travel), rickshaws (similar to wheelbarrows, but imported from Japan as a competitor to them after the Opium War), or horse-drawn coaches (vehicles used in Europe and the United States before showing up in Shanghai).

To describe, rather than show, the mixes of influences that characterized what has come to be known as “Old Shanghai,” a handbook for travelers could resort to numbers and rankings. People from fifty-six countries! The sixth-busiest port in the world! Or such a guide might refer to the sensation of walking or moving by vehicle from one part of the city to another. Going from one part of Old Shanghai to another could feel like going from London to New York to Paris, and then, by looking across the river or making your way to the old “native city,” which was sometimes called

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¹ The specific reference to MIT’s Visualizing Cultures project and its forthcoming part on Shanghai as a city of juxtapositions is not detailed in the text, but it suggests ongoing academic research on visual representations of cultural diversity and their historical contexts.
Shanghai’s “Chinatown,” or one of the other Chinese-run districts (the foreign-run enclaves were bordered by these on several sides), you would be immediately reminded you were in Asia.

Or an anecdote could do the trick of driving home the crazy-quilt cultural aspects of the city. A favorite one told of locals of all nationalities, including the most cosmopolitan Chinese residents, liking to set their watches by looking up at the massive clock tower that stood atop the Customs House on the Bund. Inside this tower—or rather inside two different versions of it, as one went up in 1893, only to be torn down about thirty years later to make way for an even grander structure, with an even bigger clock, at the same spot on the waterfront—were Westminster chimes imported from England. They played a Western melody, and because of that sound, as well as the general look of the building, the clock tower was sometimes called “Big Ching,” a nickname that drew attention to its Chinese location and also invoked a London landmark.

Shanghai did not suddenly cease being shaped by international currents and cosmopolitan flows in 1943, when the treaty port system ended amid a Japanese invasion, nor even in 1949, when the Communist Party of China proclaimed the creation of a “New China” that was supposed to be different in every way from that which had existed before. Many foreigners left when “New Shanghai” came into being, but not all, at least not immediately, and while ties to North America and Western Europe, as well as Japan, were attenuated significantly after 1949, the city’s links to other communist countries increased rather than lessened. This affected many things, including architecture: whereas once “foreign-looking” buildings were often those influenced by Western European or American styles, now they were more likely to be reminiscent of Soviet structures. There was a sense, though, in which Shanghai, while a bit more international than other Chinese cities, in part because of holdovers from the treaty port era (a bakery here that kept making French bread, a neoclassical, or an art deco, landmark there that was repurposed rather than torn down by the Communist Party), became more like other urban centers, less a place that stood apart.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, as China began to reengage with a broader spectrum of foreign countries, some locals began to play up the idea that Shanghai, due to its history, was poised to reclaim its stature as a meeting point of scattered cultures. They did so in part to encourage foreign investment and international tourism, but there was also an inherent reason. The city, especially along the waterfront and inland, in what had once been the heart of the French Concession, had many buildings that evoked the treaty port era, and there were many residents who in one way or another carried forward practices from that time.

As one Shanghai writer fascinated by the city’s past, Chen Danyan, has stressed, the definitive local dish for her and others she knows is not a purely Chinese one but rather one called Shanghai sala, a special sort of salad eaten nowhere else. This “Shanghai salad,” a hybrid name she uses as the title of one of her books, has ingredients that speak to robustly international influences: it is similar to but not quite like dishes eaten in France and Russia, for it has Chinese twists.
One thing that is different about the rebooted, somehow-linked-to-the-old-yet-simultaneously-very-new Shanghai of the last two decades is that it has become increasingly defined by chronological as much as cultural or geographical juxtapositions. Yes, if you visit Shanghai now, you can see things that suggest a range of places and a meeting point of cultures—not just a China-meets-the-West locale but also one where different parts of the East converge with different parts of the West—but that is true of many cities that now have karaoke bars as well as Starbucks. What sets Shanghai apart, at least in the specifics, is how those diverse cultural elements fit in with and sometimes can be overwhelmed by sights that bring to mind multiple eras. Many cities may be places where the past meets the present, but in Shanghai now, the range of moments that stand cheek by jowl can seem as distinctive—and as disorienting or as exciting—as the range of cultures that jostled for attention in treaty port times.

The most common periods juxtaposed now, on postcards and book covers and so forth, are the 1840s–1940s past and the 1990s–today present, but there is more to the story than that. There is the pre–Opium War past, the Mao-era interregnum, and most interestingly, in some ways, the imagined future. This is because, as shown by science-fiction novels such as Neal Stephenson’s *The Diamond Age* (1995), films such as *Code 46* (2003) and *Looper* (2012), and many other works—from television shows and movies by Asian as opposed to British and American directors, to publications by Chinese as opposed to Western authors—Shanghai is now a setting of increasing interest to those seeking to conjure what the future will be or might be like. This futuristic element is illustrated as well by journalism and travel accounts that refer to phenomena other than Shanghai when riffing on visits to the city: *Blade Runner* was not set there, but countless newspapers and blogs have run pieces that say the metropolis reminded them of that film come to life.

It is also worth noting in this regard, as a way of underscoring this point and also segueing from these introductory remarks to my interview with *Phantom Shanghai* photographer Greg Girard, how William Gibson several years ago joined fellow cyberpunk pioneer Stephenson as a member of the long lineage of Western science-fiction writers with some kind of link to Shanghai. That line includes as well Aldous Huxley, who visited and wrote about the city in the 1920s, albeit in a work of travel literature rather than any kind of novel. It more famously also includes J. G. Ballard, who was born in the metropolis in the 1930s and set two of his novels, *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and *The Kindness of Women* (1991), in the city. More than that, in his autobiography, *Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton* (2008)—which came out in the United States, at least, with a foreword by China Miéville (adding still another major sci-fi name to the lineage)—Ballard claims to have realized late in life that many of his most surreal and futuristic works set in England had been shaped by the sensibility formed by what he had seen and felt during his childhood in that far-off city. Gibson, as someone who had not set foot in Shanghai when he wrote about it, has ties to it more akin to those of Jules Verne, who set *Tribulations of a Chinaman in China* (1879) in Old Shanghai without ever having traveled to any part of China.

There is a difference, though: Verne envisioned Shanghai only as a city where the most modern machines known in Europe might exist, but nothing farther into the
future than that, making it a place where China and the West met and past and present came together, but only Chinese locals or visitors (if anyone) would see anything that was a harbinger of things still to come. Gibson, by contrast, writes of New Shanghai as containing elements of the worlds not yet created that he has dreamt of as the landscapes for his dystopian fiction. His spur to making this observation was an invitation to contribute a foreword to *Phantom Shanghai* (2007), a book of photographs by Greg Girard, the gifted artist I was fortunate enough to be asked to interview for a dialogue to accompany this essay. And so, without further ado, my questions for Girard and his answers.

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