

# The Urban Mirror in the Makings of Memories

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**Abstract**—The modern individuals are not passive containers of their memories. Rather, they are subjects who create memories. Memories are mirrors, the very apparatus upon which people identify themselves. Under personal motives or desires, they consciously or unconsciously create their own versions of the past, by subjectively neglecting some essential and stressful “others,” capturing some particular moments, and empowering certain details with special meanings. When modern individuals are petrified by their confusion or loss, they strive to “create” identity for themselves – a solid shelter to provide a strong sense of belonging, which at the same time generates an “othering” process within the dominant discourse. There are many versions of the past within people’s minds, while the ontological “past” is always under the weight of multiple “interpretations.” Literature and films are crucial means in this process of reconstructing “history.” Certain entrenched beliefs are constructed in people’s minds by interior or external forces, powers, and desires. However, those concepts also face challenges of deconstruction every now and then. This paper attempts to explore the process of reconstructing history by creating private and collective memories in modern and contemporary Chinese literature and films centering on the city of Shanghai along with some other urban narratives.

**Index Terms**—Memory, reconstruction of history in literature and films, Shanghai, urban narratives

## I. NARRATING METROPOLIS: THE FOREGROUNDED URBAN BACKDROP

In the long progress of Chinese modernization, narrations of the metropolis, in many cases, have been at the margin compared to the rural settings. The landscape of rural areas has served as the imaginary of original fertility and homeland, while cities seem to be the object of desires – a different “other” – a place full of contradictions and bewilderment. In response to the changing historical circumstances at the advent of the twentieth-century, city began to appear as a major setting of modern Chinese fiction. Notably, they are not merely the background, but function as essential drives that determine the way that a story is narrated. The city of Shanghai is a quintessential embodiment of Chinese modern transformation. As a city that has won the title of carrying the coexistence of prosperity and decadence, modern Shanghai has become an exceptionally sophisticated and culturally subtle space. As a cultural sign, it has varying connotations in different social contexts. A unique critique of this city is the contradiction of nostalgia and negation, which created an everlasting tension.

Mao Dun’s 1932 novel *Midnight* depicted the scene *Wu Laotaiye Enter the City*, which showcased a typical social

dichotomy. Lao Tai Ye (老太爷) in Chinese refers to the feudal patriarch. In this chapter, the city landscape was portrayed as outlandish and bizarre, in which the Su Zhou River changed its color to golden and green, the steel frame was put up on the Wai Bai Du Bridge, and a Yang Zhan, an exotic warehouse, looks like a huge monster under the dim dusk with an especially appalling advertisement billboard of “Light, Heat, Power.” In the story, Wu Laotaiye experienced devastating astonishment and repugnance when he was carried into the city by his descendants, and he eventually died of this shock. In stark contrast, Bowen Fan, a young man who believed the city of Shanghai was revolutionary compared to the rural lands, claimed that Laotaiye was the symbol of the rigid feudal society. In his belief, once the feudal stifling symbol came to modern metropolitan Shanghai, it has no choice but to disintegrate [1]. As a representation of the progressive youths, Fan’s saying is a typical “revolutionary discourse,” upon which people might imagine and illustrate the painful and complicated “semi-colonial and semi-feudal” past. The term “semi-colonial and semi-feudal” per se, is an established and widely accepted paradigm to interpret the historical discourse of the formation of modern cities in China.

In the 1920s and the 1930s, Shanghai, as the frontier of social revolution, was a space full of voices that were considered “progressive” at the time. Shanghai had become the center of various ideological and theoretical resources. Chinese intellectuals inherited, encountered, absorbed, and remolded miscellaneous revolutionary thoughts and ideas. In *The Pavilion: A Thought of Quartering in Metropolis – Taking Shanghai in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century 30’s as the Center*, Fu and Lin made an insightful observation about the changing cultural interpretations of Ting Zi Jian (亭子间). As a tight-spaced abode with relatively cheap renting fees in Shanghai, Ting Zi Jian mirrored the altering of social and political self-identities. They pointed out that Ting Zi Jian, as an essential material space undergoing varying interpretations in cultural memories and revolutionary discourses, became a reflective symbol of societal and cultural transformation in different historical circumstances. Ting Zi Jian had once been an abode of vibrant social critics and writers who led a bohemian life. There was a fundamental distinction between Ting Zi Jian Literati and Ting Zi Jian Writer, in which the former came from and tried to preserve the Classical Chinese literary traditions while the latter sought modern reformations [2]. Ting Zi Jian, as a miniature of the larger Shanghai, became the very substance that illustrated the discursive dichotomy that happened during Chinese modernization. In the 1920s, Ting Zi Jian was the imaginary space of the daily hardship and secular life of its literati residents. After some of these residents made their name, Ting Zi Jian became the site upon which they could produce their nostalgia. From the Northern Expedition

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(1926-1928) to the 1930s, Ting Zi Jian became a space delivering ideological debates and changes. At the time, Ting Zi Jian residents consisted of diverse identities, including left-wing literati, Chinese Trotskyites, Kuomintang reformers, and the third party. They suffered from suppression and arrest from the Nanjing Kuomintang government, and regarded themselves as heroic and progressive, which labeled this cultural space with a proud identity.

However, when this same group of writers relocated themselves to Yan'an revolutionary base in northwest China, their experience was deemed as a suspicious inclination to aesthetic formality with a political implication of being irresolute and leaning toward bourgeois [2]. In his speeches titled *The United Front is also the guiding direction of Art* in 1938 and *Talks at the Yanan Forum of Literature and Art* in 1942, Mao pointed out that the Ting Zi Jian literary workers who represented the aesthetic taste of Shanghai-style literature and art were suspicious for being formalistic, and there were a lot of mistakes in their thoughts that were preserved after they switched from Shanghai to Yan'an. He also claimed that they not only experienced two physical regions, but also two historical periods; the previous one was the semi-feudal and semi-colonial regime ruled by landlords and bourgeoisie, while the latter one is a revolutionary society led by the proletariat. It became widely believed that the literary works of Ting Zi Jian intellectuals were weaker in contents and strength compared to the authors who were in the revolutionary bases [2].

As the discursive form of Shanghai's modernization, the coexistence of nostalgia and negation has been well extended to the new era after the 1980s. Xiaoming Chen described Anyi Wang's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* as an arduous effort to invoke the lost spirit of the "Old Shanghai." The novel was written during China's rapid social transformation in the 1990s when Chinese intellectuals experienced a collective sense of loss and bewilderment under the impact of massive waves of commercialism. As a dirge to bygone conventions, the tone of nostalgia is saturated throughout the narrative. At some points, nostalgia itself is even objectified as a tangible entity. The collective cultural bewilderment of Chinese intellectuals during this fast-paced transformative period was reflected in Wang's reshaping of the narration of Shanghai. The heroine Qiyao Wang was the very incarnation of the Old Shanghai, who shrank into the dark side and dim corners of the city landscape. As Wang mentioned in one of her interviews, in order to make a story of Shanghai, the heroine was in fact portrayed as an endorser of the city [3]. As the past was gradually effaced by the official narration in the new era, Wang intended to reconstruct the image of Shanghai. However, when her version had become a well-accepted paradigm of the city's profile, she openly negated it. In Anyi Wang's conversation with Xudong Zhang in 2004, she claimed that her creed in literature was different from Xingjian Gao. Gao deeply believed in the representation of "pure, universal, liberal individuals" [4], while she shared more agreements in positioning herself as a product of the People's Republic of China. In other words, since Anyi Wang has her political consensus and literary ground with Renmin(人民). Politically, *Renmin* in Chinese specifically refers to the people, the commoners. Once the social

circumstances changed, she couldn't appreciate her intimacy to the Old Shanghai that engendered by the literary motives of *The Song of the Everlasting Sorrow* anymore [3].

## II. NARRATING AND IMAGING FOR THE MARGINALIZED

The contemporary writer Xiaowen Ren took a different approach in her writings of Shanghai. In the prologue of *Fu Sheng Ershiyi Zhang*, literally means *21 Chapters of a Floating Life*, to answer the commonly faced question that whether her writings are "non-fiction," Xiaowen Ren stated that, in her eyes, there was no place for writings that were absolutely "non-fiction," because every narration was selected and influenced by emotions, memories, and the instincts of self-perfections [5]. *Fu Sheng* is the Chinese word that means an ephemeral, void, floating, drifting, and dream-like life. It is a classical Chinese term and literary tradition that Xiao-wen Ren borrowed. In a similar sense, Stephen Owen used the term "memoir" instead of "memories" in his discussion about Shen Fu's *A Drifting Life* [6]. The original title is of *A Drifting Life is Fu Sheng Liu Ji* (浮生六记), literally means six chapters of a floating life. In Owen's discussion, certain illusions in Shen Fu's memoir – a subjective reconstruction of his past – haunted him in the process of repetition [6]. Xiaowen Ren's short fiction *Xinzhong Liu*, a piece based on the historical documentary report by Qinghua Ruan, focused on the marginalized people who had been neglected in the grand narrative. Ruan's report focuses on Shanghai Vagrants Transformation Movement. After its retreat to Taiwan, the Kuomintang party dispatched the air force to bomb Shanghai. Its political motive was to completely paralyze the city's industry, which also caused civilian casualties. The newborn People's Republic of China government sought to protect the people from the bombing. The author of the original report believed that the bombing threat also provided an opportunity for the government to solve the dilemma of how to transform a capitalistic Shanghai belonging to rich bourgeoisie into a productive city belonging to Renmin [7]. Shanghai was a city of capitalistic consumption in the new government's understanding at the time. To make the city a place that belonged to "the people" and worked for "the people," the new government decided to initiate a reformative program by moving the social group of Youmin (游民) from Shanghai to the Northern Suzhou area. Youmin, vagrants who had no stable job and income, were relocated to plant owner-less lands in Suzhou [7]. As they were forbidden to return to Shanghai, the "old Shanghai" lifestyle engendered a strong mood of nostalgia. According to Ruan's description, social spaces considered containing the Capitalist elements were canceled in Shanghai, such as coffeehouses and teahouses, while the coffeehouse on the farm of Northern Suzhou, which was outside Shanghai, became the last site preserving an "Old Shanghai" flavor. Some older generations considered the 1950's move from Shanghai to Northern Suzhou a lucky fortune, while others recalled lots of hardships. Xiaowen Ren rewrote this episode of history by centering on the life trajectory of an ordinary person rather than simply retelling the grand discourse of official memory. This approach becomes the major reason for the prestige that Xiaowen Ren received. She wrote ordinary

individuals into the collective memories, which empowered the voices that had been covered by the dominant grand narrative.

Writing experiments from the standpoints of marginalized individuals were evident in many works in the New Era Literature after the Cultural Revolution, which have been well extended into cinematic narratives. The sixth-generation directors used non-professional actors and extremely long takes to narrate alternative stories in both metropolises, such as Shanghai and Beijing, and county-level cities, for example, the striking representation of Fenyang in Zhangke Jia's films. Ye Lou, a prominent film director of the sixth generation, is a notable representative of this feature. Centering on the marginalized dwellers, his *Suzhou River* (2000) depicted Shanghai in a strikingly abnormal way by showing the invisible corners of the metropolis, which are shadowed by Shanghai's modernization legend. Lou articulated his understanding of the city by setting the story on the Suzhou River, a river that thrived a bustling life and was polluted by industrialization. Suzhou River is both a spatial symbol and a hidden rhythm in Lou's cinematic narrative. Notably, the film was essentially driven by emotional flows of individuals rather than realistic plots that are embedded in wider society. This specific emphasis on individuals is idiosyncratic in the six-generation directors' cinematic practices. Lou's shaky lenses create a highly internalized psychological atmosphere. Compared to the fifth generation, Lou resisted grand narratives by approaching the city in this distinctively experimental way. In *Suzhou River*, He positioned his cameras toward wandering individuals instead of group images signifying "society". In *Suzhou River*, the heroine Mu Dan fell out of the typical depiction of Shanghai women. Being dream-like, vibrant, rebellious, and resolute, she was apparently different from the classical images of elegant and tender women in Old Shanghai. Meanwhile, she was also remote from the elite women in the workplace that are common in modern Shanghai images. The male protagonist, Ma Da, is a delivery man struggling for survival in daily life at the margin of the metropolis. Lou's characters were constantly acting in pursuit of purposes other than mundane materialism, though they were surrounded by secular desires. It is more suitable to describe them as interrogating the very concepts of their individual beings. This metaphysical interrogation is evident in *Suzhou River*, and more conspicuous in *Summer Palace* (2006). With a highly distinguishable personal style of shaky lenses and handheld cameras, Lou transformed Shanghai into a magical entity that resists a clear definition. The multi-faceted Shanghai in Lou's images seems to be unfathomably variable, possessing an inherent capacity to be eternally dynamic.

An issue worth clarifying is that it is not accurate to view Ye Lou as an eagle-eyed critic of China's social illnesses. In fact, Ye Lou's films are always drastically controversial and caused divided opinions among the domestic audience. Most of his films, for example, *Suzhou River*, *Summer Palace* (2006), and *The Shadow Play* (2018) represented social issues and the external background in an extremely personalized way. In other words, Ye Lou was not so much a recorder in representing a panoramic history but rather an avant-garde director who persisted in an individualized way to create cinematic narratives. This is also how the sixth

generation is different from the fifth-generation directors. The fifth generation departed from the previous stereotypes, yet was believed to reconstruct another version of grand narrative. In stark contrast, the sixth generation focused on individuals and artistic experiments. The sixth-generation Chinese film directors made their name in international film festivals and received remarkable rewards, yet faced unpopularity in China, which was not the sole result of official censorship. Jinhua Dai metaphorically described contemporary Chinese literature and films as a space constituted by "a city of mirrors," illustrating that the cultural state of contemporary China is intervened by multiple discursive influences driven by different imaginations, powers, and desires. According to Dai, the universal welcome of the cultural productions made by the sixth generation from outside China and the corresponding scrutiny of official censorship in China during the early 1990s seemed to be both problematic and therefore reflect as cultural symptoms, which Dai described as "landscape in the mist" by using the 1988 Greek film's name [8]. Dai believed that the western critiques altered the six-generation directors' actual cultural meanings in their interpretations by possessing presuppositions of Chinese experimental films [8].

Ye Lou's discussion on *Suzhou River* illustrated certain misplacements that happened in its initial reception. As Lou recalled in his interview with Weiwen Chen, the first batch of western comments described the film as a replica of Kieslowski. When *Suzhou River* was screened in America, it was discerned as being Hitchcock. In Hong Kong, Lou's cinematic representations were regarded as similar to Wong Kar-wai's. The second wave of comments was represented by a comparative study in details of the cinematic language of *Suzhou River* and *Vertigo* (1958), which Lou thought as particularly intriguing but not entirely accurate. For example, some critics believed the music of these two were very similar, while Lou and his German composer didn't realize it at all. In fact, they only discovered it after downloading and listening to *Vertigo*'s soundtrack. Conversely, Lou himself felt these two films were completely different in terms of cinematic languages. Later analyses entailed the influence of the French New Wave cinema on *Suzhou River*, which Lou confirmed and claimed that he loves the New Wave films enthusiastically. He also stated that the French New Wave films were his learning material as a youth [9].

Lou's discussion on the western reception of *Suzhou River* is by no means to demonstrate that the western critics didn't understand his films; rather, even though there were some obstacles, as Lou himself put it, "All factors tell me that this film wouldn't be successful in western society and the western market, but I find that everyone did understand the meanings, and my expression was effective. When you accurately convey your feelings, others will follow you to think in your system and find a relation with their own life" [9]. Notably, Lou also believed that it is "very dull" to consciously repel a cultural system as he claimed that the mermaid in the film should not be read as a fable of the West [9]. Instead, Lou believed that there was not a clear-cut boundary between the East and West.

Another sixth-generation director, Wenguang Wu, placed his camera on several independent artists who led a bohemian style of life in Beijing in his documentary *Bumming in*

*Beijing* (1990). These individuals were trapped in their social reality, yet persisted to practice their complete freedom of choices. Furthermore, the most well-known representative of six-generation directors, Zhangke Jia, shed light on marginalized individuals who could hardly catch up with the rapid economic and social transformation under the open-door policy in his “homeland trilogy,” which includes *Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002). The similar portrayals also appeared in *Still Life* (2006) and *Mountains May Depart* (2015). The economic reform in the 1990s created systematic material opportunities in Chinese society; However, what Jia strived to capture was the social groups that failed to climb up the ladder and was blocked by the gradually enlarged social gaps.

### III. A PLAGUE OR A BLESSING: THE POST-MODERN APPROACHES TO RECONSTRUCT THE URBAN NARRATIVES

Post-modern narration canceled the linear and progressive notion of time. Under post-modern mindset, authors and film directors reconstruct history with a different approach that departs from conventions. As Fredrick Jameson pointed out, the popular “recycling” of the past is a cultural symptom of post-modernism, and memory is understood as “a process of becoming” which is subject to revision [10]. Post-modernistic narratives sometimes incurred criticism for being excessive fragmentation, void pastiches, or simple collages that lack of meanings and creativity. However, they also offer us distinctively new approaches to reviving the past, bringing new imagination into memories.

Hong Kong director Kar-wai Wong, who was born in Shanghai and migrated to Hongkong when he was five years old, has placed a blurred and forever-haunted nostalgia in his film sequence. The duality of Hong Kong and Shanghai is evident in Wong’s cinematic practices. His *In the Mood for Love* (2000) captured the old Shanghai in a culturally stylish way. Set in a narrow lane of Hong Kong in the 1960s, the film contains tremendous elements that reminded the local audience of Shanghai, such as language, living space, dress, Long-Tang and local foods. Long-Tang is similar to the English word “alley”, but in Chinese context, it specifically bears a rich cultural memory that related with Shanghai and other southern provinces. Long-Tang is a unique residential form and also a place for leisure, children’s playing, street vendors and other cultural activities. Wong even described the heroine’s Chi-Pao as “our moms’ dress” [11]. A visual feast of emotional undercurrent, blurred impressions, cultural nostalgia and Wong’s personal aesthetics, the whole movie, in fact, can be regarded as a self-reference of the essence of films: the role playing. Lizhen Su and Muyun Zhou role-played the extramarital affair of their spouses, in order to understand their mentality of disloyalty. Ironically, they literally fell in love with each other. The boundary between pretension and sincerity, illusions and realities, fiction and life were blurred. Like most of Wong’s films, *In the Mode for Love* is fundamentally driven by images and atmosphere, instead of plot. Light, shadow, and mirrors are sophisticatedly utilized as carriers to render the theme: the suppressed desire, moral dilemma, unreachable love, nostalgia, and bewilderment. Vivian P.Y.Lee believed that by using a post-modern way to image the past in fragmentations,

Wong’s trilogy of the 1960s went beyond the common form of nostalgic comedies and achieved self-reflexivity, that is, performance and reconstruction of the past [12]. Thus, it is not simply to represent the theme of nostalgia, but to interrogate the very category of nostalgia itself.

Abbas described Hong Kong as a post-modern city at the intersection of the East and the West, where linear history vanished [13]. Wong Kar-wai is brilliant in shaping time and memory. To identify the historical complex of the cultural memory of the city, the theme of time seems to be unsettled and has been interrogated again and again with different cinematic experiments in Wong’s sequence. The nostalgic memory of the 1960s Hong Kong was tackled in three interrelated films, *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *In the Mood for Love*, and *2046* (2004). Notably, Intertextuality is apparent in this trilogy. At the surface, the main characters were consistent and correlated. Wong intentionally used the same actors and represented their changes under the progressive flow of time. Given the film a title called “wandering in time,” Stephen Teo described *2046* as Wong Kar-wai’s most fulfilled work [11]. The reason that the Japanese character set out for the specific time 2046 was explained by his whisper - a declaration of the eternity of still time in 2046.

Another post-modern classic is Stanley Kwan’s innovative narrative to approach the legendary actress Lingyu Ruan’s life. The film authentically recorded the scarcity of historical materials and photos, and the dilemma that some of Ruan’s original films were lost. The camera presented the very process of looking for archives, interviews, and re-shooting. The narration is deliberately fragmentary with the episodes vacillating between the actual depiction of Ruan and the cast members of this film on in real life. Moreover, meta-narrations are emphasized with scenes on how Ruan was acting “films in films”. Outside the camera, the same gender tragedy happened to Ruan’s role and later herself. While the last scene depicted Ruan lying still and lifeless at her funeral, the director incorporated a scene that normally would not be recorded: Maggie Cheung, the actress who portrayed Ruan, was asked to act again because the director thought there was a breath not held when she was acting the dead. This entire process was recorded and presented in the film with specific accent, leading the audience to sense the existence of the contingent camera and the ongoing process of “reconstruction.” Centered around Ruan’s personal tragedy as an actress in her time, the film also intertwined its biographical preoccupations with broader urban immediacy by highlighting the duality between Shanghai and Hong Kong. During the Japanese invasion and occupation of Shanghai, Hong Kong became a temporary shelter for refugees during wartime as people relocated from Shanghai to Hong Kong. This wandering situation of displaced directors and actors is an essential background of Lingyu Ruan’s distressing tragedy, which was entangled with specific temporal and spatial circumstances.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Memory is a subjective processing of conscious or subconscious interpretation of the past that has been reconstructed by external societal changes and influences. In

modern Chinese literature and cinema, urban settings have interplayed with major cultural symptoms of modernity. It is not so much an objective tableau as an engine that substantially drives the storyline and character portrayal. Flowing beneath the narrative form, it is the characteristic of the city that engenders the vitality of the dramatic past through memories and psychologically operates the destiny of the characters. The urban setting in Shanghai in literature and films is a multi-faceted lens to examine the influences and rebellions in Chinese modernity. Ultimately, it is also the discursive site where individuals' experiences, fates, faiths, and emotions are intersected with forking paths, resisting a single definition and open to change.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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