

The ‘Home Affairs’ of Three Hong Kong-Based Shanghainese Writers

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1 *Living and Writing Elsewhere*

On December 22nd, 2008, one month prior to the official release of Wu Zheng’s 吳正 (b1948) short story collection *Houchuang* 後窗 (Rear Window), the publisher Shandong Literary Press held a symposium in Beijing to discuss and publicize the new book.¹ What is noteworthy of this symposium is that by categorizing the author under *Haipai* 海派 (‘Shanghai school’),² as opposed to previous general consideration of him as a foreign or Hong Kong writer, the discussants had made a home-welcoming gesture to and acknowledged social inclusion of Wu Zheng, who ended his thirty-year long migrant life in Hong Kong in mid-2008 and returned to mainland China for good. Such categori-

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- 1 The minutes of this symposium was compiled into an article by Xiaotian 曉田 and published in a magazine called Free Forum of Literature. See Xiaotian, »Wu Zheng xiaoshuoji Houchuang yantaohui jiyao« 吳正小說集《後窗》研討會紀要 [Record of Symposium on Wu Zheng’s Collection of Short Stories »Rear Window«], *Wenxue ziyoutan* 文學自由談 2/2009, 145–160.
- 2 Ibid., 150–151. For a detailed discussion of the salient features of the ‘Shanghai School’, see Yang Yi 楊義, *Jingpai Haipai zonglun* 京派海派綜論 [A Comprehensive Discussion of the Beijing and Shanghai Schools] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 2003).

zation, moreover, reminds us of another important fact that Wu Zheng had devoted tremendous efforts to writing about his home city Shanghai, which is one of the defining characteristics of the writers of the 'Shanghai School', throughout his diasporic years in the south of China's border. To him, who has a life long weakness for Shanghai, Hong Kong is never home but forever 'elsewhere.'

Indeed, Wu Zheng was not alone in constant, or rather tenacious, representation of the Shanghainese experience from abroad. Fellow Shanghainese Cheng Naishan 程乃珊 (b1946) and Sun Shufen 孫樹芬 (1933–2005) had also migrated to Hong Kong for more than a decade and associated themselves closely with Shanghai whenever they wrote and published. This unremitting love of textualization or literary production of Shanghai pronounces them the prominent few who present a sharp contrast to peers of the same origin, like Xi Xi 西西 (b1938), Nongfu 農婦 (Sun Danning 孫淡寧, b1922), Yan Chunggou 顏純鈞 (b1948), Jiang Yun 蔣芸 (dates unknown, migration to Hong Kong in 1969) and Li Chun'en 李純恩 (dates unknown, migration 1979), who migrated to Hong Kong during the period between 1950 and 1979 and have been identifying with and writing more of the territory where they have settled themselves. Needless to say, such difference is even more apparent if compared to the local born writers. It appears that the time factor, i.e. duration of residence in Hong Kong, exerted no influence on the literary production by Wu Zheng, Cheng Naishan and Sun Shufen. On the one hand, it failed to draw these three Hong Kong-based writers closer to their host city. On the other hand, it offered them no assistance in reconstructing a contemporary Shanghai city back in the mainland, which was alienated to them. The result was a persistent re-imagination of Shanghainese experience, already in the past, either through poetic purification, or anecdotic excavation, or relegendization.

2 *The Romantic Reduction and Poetic Purification of Shanghainese Experience*

Among the three writers of this study, Cheng Naishan was the first to cross the border to become a Hong Kong immigrant in 1949, the year in which the Communist Party took power from the ousted Nationalist Party. She was followed by Wu Zheng in 1978 and Sun Shufen in 1993, thanks to the open up of mainland China. Nevertheless, I shall still regard Cheng Naishan as chronologically second to Wu Zheng since she was too young to write professionally

before taking her first leave from the British colony in 1958,³ not until she returned at the age of forty-four to pursue a working career in Hong Kong. As for Sun Shufen, he was the eldest among them, and the earliest to establish himself in the realm of creative writing. Yet he ended up last, both in joining the diaspora and in literary quality of work. It is out of this consideration that we first discuss Wu Zheng and his works.

Wu Zheng was nine years old when his parents left him in the care of his grandmother and migrated to Hong Kong. Educated as an accountant, Wu Zheng's father taught economics in a college in Anhui province. In fear of the 1957 anti-rightist movement which oppressed intellectuals and academicians considered as detrimental to the socialists' ruling, he left his profession and homeland to set up a textile mill (funded by some Taiwanese entrepreneurs) in Hong Kong. Through the remittance of child's monthly maintenance, he had not only given Wu Zheng a relatively comfortable life back in Shanghai, but also prevented the son from being forced out of the city and exiled to the countryside like tens and millions of rusticated youth during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).⁴ Wu Zheng continued to reside in his Shanghai family house, learned music and English and even began writing poetry. Eventually, he was allowed to join his parents in Hong Kong in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping initiated his economic reform policy and opened up China.

After coming to Hong Kong, the thirty year old young man worked in his father's company briefly, and turned to teaching music and running a music shop at Taikoo City 太古城 (a northeast district of the Hong Kong Island). In the next thirty years, Wu Zheng spent his free time writing, and was prolific in producing three collections of poems, two novels and one collection of short stories, two collections of essays, one collection of random remarks on the craft of fiction, as well as translations of three English novels into Chinese.⁵ Of all

3 These information were acquired through personal interviews I conducted with Chen Naishan in Shanghai on July 2nd, 2008, and with Wu Zheng in Shenzhen on Oct 17, 2009.

4 For a detailed discussion of the Cultural Revolution, see Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Harvard, 2006).

5 Wu Zheng has published in poetry *Mengya de zhongzi* 萌芽的種子 [The Budding Seed] (Hong Kong: Ledu, 1984), *Ai de shi yuan* 愛的詩原 [The Poetic Prairie of Love] (Changsha: Hu'nan wenyi chubanshe, 1988) and *Xianggang mengying* 香港夢影 [Pieces of Dreams of Hong Kong] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1991); in fiction, *Shanghainen* [Shanghainese], in essay, *Hei bai Gang Hu* 黑白港滙 [Hong Kong and Shanghai in Black and White] (Hong Kong; Shanghai, Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1997) and *Huimou Xiangdao yun qi shi* 回眸香島雲起時 [Looking Back at Hong Kong as the Clouds Rise] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2000); in literary

genres, Wu Zheng is best at fiction. His first novel *Niguang zhong de Xianggang* 逆光中的香港 (Hong Kong in the Backlight; thereafter retitled as *Shanghai* in its ensuing editions)⁶ was published by Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House in 1987, second novel *Lijiao renshe* 立交人生 (Life at the Intersection; 2004) by Hong Kong Sunmoon Net, and *Rear Window*, as mentioned before, by Shandong Literary Press in 2008. What is striking about these works is that they all share the same subject matter Shanghai. Moreover, most of the time, the Shanghai portrayed by Wu Zheng is not one of the present affluent metropolitan as portrayed by many Shanghai School writers, but one of the past—from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Shanghai is an autobiographical novel. It tells the story of Li Zhengzhi 李正之 leaving Shanghai and living in Hong Kong. It begins with Li Zhengzhi and his girl friend breaking the news of his imminent migration to Hong Kong to their bosom friend Zhang Xiaodong 章曉冬. Surprisingly, Zhang moves ahead of Li Zhengzhi by marrying herself to a Hong Kong factory worker Huang Jinfu 黃金富. In Hong Kong, while Li Zhengzhi joins his parents and pursues his dream of running a music shop, Zhang Xiaodong seeks an independent life by finding herself a job and divorcing Huang Jinfu who moves north to seek business opportunities in post-Mao China. The novel ends with Li Zhengzhi and his wife helping Zhang Xiaodong to rescue Huang Jinfu from detention by mainland blackmailers, and the couple returning to Hong Kong in exclamation of disappointment with the speedily changing city of Shanghai in the post-Mao era.

Despite his excitement about migrating to Hong Kong, Li reveals a deep sense of loss in leaving his home city Shanghai. As noted by the mainland scholar Yuan Liangjun, one of the most moving moments in the novel comes when Li Zhengzhi stands at the junction of the Lo Wu Bridge 羅湖橋 and points his finger back in the direction of Shenzhen City, telling the security officer in tears

criticism, *Xiaoshuo xiaoshuo* 小說小說 [Fiction Fiction] (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2005) and in translation the reportage-thriller about the Iranian revolution by Ken Follett, *Yingchi xingdong* 鷹翅行動 [Mission Eagle Wings; *On Wings of Eagles*, 1983] (Guangzhou: Huacheng, 1985), *Duoru aibe* 墮入愛河 [Falling in Love] (Changsha: Hu'nan wenyi chubanshe, 1988) and the Vietnam war novel by E. M. Corder, *Lie lu zhe* 獵鹿者 [*The Dear Hunter*, 1978] (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 1988).

6 Wu Zheng's *Hong Kong in the Backlight* was renamed as *Shanghai* (*Shanghainen* 上海人) when published by Taiwan Xidai Publishing in 1988, by Hong Kong Zhengzhi Publishing in 1991, and by Beijing renmin wenxue in 1995.

that »that is my homeland, I wanna take a glance at it«.⁷ What Yuan did not point out is that by delineating Li Zhengzhi's emotional feeling, the author has actually struck a high note on the issue of identity, which faces or even haunts every migrant throughout his/her diasporic life. This episode also offers a metaphorical hint to partly explain why Li fails to identify himself with the local people of Hong Kong but associates with fellow Shanghainese immigrants including his lover Zhang Xiaodong in most of second part of the novel.

As a locale, Shanghai is nostalgically remembered in the novel through constant comparison with Hong Kong. The protagonist heaps praises of Shanghai at the expense of dismissing Hong Kong. His vivid memory of the people and things from Shanghai studs the novel. Wu Zheng's description of Li Shengqing, Li Zhengzhi's father, even matches the image of a Shanghai *laokele* 老克勒 (literary 'old color', referring to one who maintained the Westernized bourgeoisie life style of the 1940s' Shanghai):

He has meticulously maintained a neat outlook: beneath his morning robe reveals the hard collar of an "ARROW" brand double breast shirt, knotted in between is a slanted strips neck tie. Even at home, he will still wear stiffly, in a pair of dress pants with folded lines like the sharp blades of knife.⁸

This consistent 'turning back' to the old Shanghai confirms that the narrator/author has been psychologically displacing himself from the locale where he actually resides. Yet in so doing, he is assuming an identity which is stagnant, unchanging, merely a fixation of the past Shanghai. This is what I shall call 'a romantic reduction of Shanghai', for the contemporary facet of the city has been erased.

Such a 'stagnant' identity is also tenaciously maintained throughout *Life at the Intersection and Rear Window*. In *Life at the Intersection*, which is retitled *Changye bansheng* 長夜半生 (Long Nights, Mid-Life) in a later edition, the character Zhanyu 湛玉 took her daughter Xiuxiu 秀秀 out to MacDonald's for dinner. As she looks out from the large glass window of the restaurant, she sees Fuxing Villa on the opposite side of the intersection:

This is the famous alley of a upper class residential area. [...] At] the entrance of the alley are a pair of large, painted black iron gates [...]. Again, she notices a grey haired, aged couple—must be what is called 'old color' household of this alley—as the street lights begin to glow in the evening, they return from Huaihai Road, the old Missies

7 Yuan Liangjun 袁良駿, *Xianggang xiaoshuo liupai shi* 香港小說流派史 [A History of Schools of Fiction in Hong Kong] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2008).

8 Wu Zheng, *Shanghainese*, 63. All English translation of texts in this paper are mine.

holding the arm of the Mister, walk in slow, a bit staggering steps to their home in the alley, with plastic bags of food in their hands.⁹

What Zhanyu remembers of Fuxing Villa is that it was once a private dancing school where she attended ballet lessons on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons at the age of seven to eight.

In *Life at the Intersection*, the lives of two couples intermingle.¹⁰ The first couple are Zhaozheng 兆正 and Zhanyu, who are soul mates long before they are married. They live in Shanghai as a writer and an editor of a state-run magazine respectively. Yet both of them have secret admirers. For Zhanyu, it is her classmate, the narrator 'I'; and for Zhaozheng, his cousin Yuping 雨萍. 'I' and Yuping eventually move to Hong Kong. The former become a successful businessman and the latter, his housewife. When China opens its door in 1978, 'I' travels frequently to Shanghai for business. He develops a relationship with Zhanyu, whose marriage is falling apart, whereas the lonely Yuping in Hong Kong thinks dearly of Zhaozheng, her unforgettable idol cousin.

The novel observes symmetry in narrative structure by having the two men Zhaozheng and 'I' walking aimlessly on the streets of two different parts of the world in the same long night. Zhaozheng is in Shanghai, and 'I' in Hong Kong. Yet the focus is never on Hong Kong, but Shanghai, for both Yuping and 'I' are missing their loved ones who are physically in Shanghai. As the lives of the two couples intermingle, the narration mostly comprises their fond memories of the pre-Deng Xiaoping Shanghai. It basically 'looks back' more than 'glances forward'.

Besides such nostalgic reduction, Wu Zheng never stops purifying poetically the so-called Shanghainese experience in his fiction, and this, indeed, marks the major difference between Wu Zheng's writing and that of Cheng Naishan and Sun Shufen. By 'poetic purification,' I mean the 'downsizing' of a particular type of experience from the general level to one limited to arts and literature. In Wu Zheng's case, there is his trademark conscious endeavor in portraying his protagonists as those who are versed in music, talented in creative writing, and thus presenting sharp contrast to other characters who lack, or indeed are deprived by the author of, such artistic qualities. Li Zhengzhi and Zhaozheng of Wu Zheng's first two novels are almost identical in their zealous pursue of music

9 Wu Zheng, *Lijiao renseng* 立交人生 [Life at the Intersection] (Hong Kong: Riyue chubanshe, 2004), 58-59.

10 Wu Zheng, *Changye bansheng* 長夜半生 [Long Nights, Mid-Life] (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2006).

and a writing career. We find no exception of such character in the short stories appeared in *Rear Window*. For example, Ailun Huang in »Ailun Huang« 愛倫黃 (Ellen Wong), Yang Xiaohai 楊曉海 in »Fenghua an« 風化案 (A Sex Scandal), and Ren Yin 任胤 in »Xushiqu« 敘事曲 (The Ballad) are all Shanghainese who are good at violin. The former two earn their living in Hong Kong as violin instructors; the latter meets up with Xiafen 霞芬 frequently in his house to »talk about music, painting, poetry, as well as Western literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries«.¹¹

Among the seventeen discussants who attended the symposium mentioned before, He Shaojun 賀紹俊 made two important comments, which help us sum up this section on Wu Zheng's writing. First, He points out that Wu Zheng, who »migrated to Hong Kong rather early«, »had wrapped up his previous cultural memory into a bundle and brought it to Hong Kong, where he kept part of them intact, and then took them out to polish, as if they were cultural relic.« Second, he considers Wu Zheng's treatment of Shanghai memory as out of »elitist awareness«, which has been absent in modern Chinese literature and triggers nostalgia.¹² In my opinion, Wu Zheng's clinging to his cultural memories and feeling superior of being a Shanghainese led him to purify what he considers as Shanghainese experience, allowing nothing more than arts and literature to occupy the center stage of his writing.

3 *Revisits: Anecdotic Excavation of the Old Shanghai*

Both Cheng Naishan and Sun Shufen did not share Wu Zheng's poetic purification but romantic reduction of Shanghainese experience. They chose a different path by digging into the history¹³ of the recent half century, searching for and reconstructing exciting anecdotes and legends of Shanghai prominent figures, be they celebrities, mafia or prominent leaders of enormous industries, or renowned relatives and friends whom they associated or were familiar with, or those nostalgic local seniors commonly known as the 'old color'. In this respect, their writings constitute what I call 'excavation of Shanghai'.

11 Wu Zheng, »Xushiqu«, in Wu Zheng, *Houchuang* (Ji'nan: Shandong wenyi chubanshe, 2008), 281.

12 Xiaotian, »Wu Zheng xiaoshuoji Houchuang yantaohui jiyao«, 146.

13 In the Afterword of *Jinrongjia* 金融家 [The Financier], Cheng Naishan points out that what she had written was indeed »family histories of Shanghainese«. See Cheng, *Jinrongjia* (Hong Kong: Qin + Yuan, 1993), 577.

Cheng Naishan was born into a prominent family of which the grandfather Cheng Muhao 程慕灝 (1898–1991) was a renowned banker posted to Hong Kong as the deputy director of, and eventually advisor to, the Bank of China. This was the reason why the three year old girl and family first migrated to the British colony in 1949. Cheng Naishan's second migration spanned from 1991 to 2002.¹⁴ It was during this period of time that she, who worked as an office lady from publishing house to trading company, wrote from outside Shanghai. Indeed prior to that, in the 1980s, Cheng had already made her name known through publishing short stories in book form, such as *Tian'e zhi si* 天鵝之死 (The Death of a Swan; 1982), *Lanwu* 藍屋 (Blue House; 1984), *Dingxiang bieshu* 丁香別墅 (The Clove Villa; 1986), *Nü'er jing* 女兒經 (Girls' Matters; 1988) and *Qianzheng* 簽證 (Permits; 1988), as well as the novel *Jinrong jia* 金融家 (The Financier; 1990). Also on her list of publication are two collections of essays *Xiangjiang shui, Hujiang qing* 香江水·滬江情 (Hong Kong's Water, Shanghai's Feelings; 1989) and *Ni hao, Pake* 你好·帕克 (Hello, Pake! 1989), and the co-translated *Shanghai shengsi jie* 上海生死劫 (1988) from Nien Cheng's 鄭念 (1915–2009) English memoir *Shanghai Life and Death* (1987). After she migrated to Hong Kong, Cheng Naishan's productivity in fiction seemed to reduce drastically to only one novel, i.e. *Shan shui you xiangfeng* 山水有相逢 (Mountains and Waters Will Meet Again; 1999) and one short story »Shanghaijie qinghua« 上海街情話 (The Love Story of Shanghai Street).

Intended as a sequel, Mountains and Waters Will Meet Again was supposed to recount from 1949 a half century's happenings of Zhu Jingchen 祝景臣, the Shanghainese entrepreneur protagonist of *The Financier*. Yet Cheng Naishan found the plot unable to contain the new stories she had in mind after moving to Hong Kong.¹⁵ She ended up abandoning her original plan and wrote a different and shorter novel about the two Shanghainese Wang Tieru 汪鐵如 and Ye Baixiang 葉百祥 who fare directly opposite in their business careers during the fifty years (1940s–1990s) that are divided into four periods in different cities across two continents—Shanghai, Hong Kong and New York. In the novel, Wang Tieru starts out as a Shanghai tycoon, yet he loses much of his assets and helplessly sees his weaving factory business going downhill after moving to Hong Kong. In contrast, journalist Ye Baixiang seizes every new opportunity brought

14 The date of leaving Hong Kong was confirmed by Cheng Naishan personally (Interview in Shanghai on July 2nd, 2008).

15 Cheng Naishan, »Xiebujin de Shanghai gushi« 寫不盡的上海故事 [The Endless Shanghai Story], in Cheng Naishan, *Shan shui you xiangfeng* 山水有相逢 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1999), 186.

about by the political changes and emerges as a tycoon, owning several huge companies in the three cities. What remains unchanged in this novel is Cheng Naishan's making Shanghainese her main characters and leaving no room for Hong Kongers. Anecdotes of Wang Tieru's mistress Fu Meiyi 付美儀 are purposely constructed out of those eminent historical figures like members of the first badge of Chinese airhostesses. They are interwoven in the text to relate the two Shanghainese tycoons as well as to complement their status. Moreover, Cheng describes in details the Mandarin Club located along Jing'ansi 靜安寺 Road, the place where the American Chinese soldier Michael Mai 麥馬可 met his lover Li Junyue 李君月. Even when the story moves on to the 1990s, in which Steven 史蒂分, son of Micheal Mai, takes an official trip to China with his New York colleague Fan Jihong 范繼紅, a native of Shandong but who grew up in Shanghai, the author provides a long conversation between the two regarding their impression of Shanghai, saying nothing but praise of the Chinese metropolis in its old glory. Yet among the examples that display Cheng's Shanghai nostalgia, nothing is more apparent than allowing the eighty year old Wang Tieru to retire to Shanghai to spend his remaining days at the end of the story.

First collected in *Shanghai tan'ge*,¹⁶ The Love Story of Shanghai Street was written in 2000. According to Cheng Naishan, her protagonist Master Xiaomao 小毛師傅 is modeled after a Shanghainese *cheong-sum* 旗袍 (a close-fitting women's dress with high neck and slit skirt) tailor of the same name. The tailor was known to her grandmother and mother. He migrated to Hong Kong in 1959 and ran a *cheong-sum* shop at Shanghai Street of Mongkok District in Kowloon until he migrated to Canada in the 1980s. Having spoken to him personally when he took his vacation in Hong Kong in 2000,¹⁷ Cheng Naishan made good use of the information gathered to write this piece of work. Although the narrative setting is 1990s' Hong Kong, the characters think and talk as if they were still living in 1940s Shanghai which the author dearly portrays. Hong Kong, after all, is abjectly absent in the story.

Shanghai Tango contains more anecdotes of the 'old color' which are stylistically similar to those essays Cheng Naishan wrote and published later,

16 Cheng Naishan, *Shanghai tan'ge* 上海探戈 [Shanghai Tango] (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2002), 236-254.

17 Cheng Naishan, Preface to *Shanghajibie qinghua* 上海街情話 [A Love Story of Shanghai Street], (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2007). According to Cheng Naishan's Preface, this short story was first written in 2000 and published on a Hong Kong literary magazine. Later, she sold its copy right to Hong Kong movie director Stanley Kwan 關錦鵬 (b1957) who made it into a television series.

commonly known as *jishi sanwen* 紀實散文 ('essays of factual records'). Yet as argued by Chen Huifen, senior research fellow of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, these essays are not absolutely factual but a mixture of factual records and the author's own literary imagination.¹⁸ I shall therefore consider these essays similarly to Chen Naishan's fiction in demonstrating her anecdotic excavation of the old Shanghai. For instance, as part of the effort in 're-discovering' the 'old colour' culture, »A Fei zhengzhuan« 阿飛正傳 [The True Biography of Playboys] delineates how middle age stylish playboys of the 1970s indulged in the pleasure of listening to records of Hollywood movie soundtracks, dancing, photography, playing tennis, bridge and mahjong. Another essay »*ARROW* xiansheng« ARROW先生 (Mr. Arrow) gives a vignette of Mr. Qian, who was a bank manager of one of the four largest banks in Shanghai before 1949, insisting on wearing his »Arrow« brand long-sleeve shirts even after he was assigned to teach English in the same school as Chen Naishan. In studying these essays, Chen Huifen comments:

Chen Naishan relies on her identity of a 'Shanghai descendent', exudes confidence and excavates and revives an 'actual', 'real Shanghai' [...]. Be it an 'on-site' interview, or evidence of old photos of figures of the past dynasties, her purpose is none other than providing 'a sense of history', so as to display the 'reality' and 'liveliness' of her narration.¹⁹

In my opinion, this nostalgic remembrance of 'old colour' culture came about mainly because the Hong Kong-based author faced double marginalization—neither was she able to associate herself with post-Mao modern Shanghai which puzzled her with its drastic socio-economic changes under the modernization current, nor could she identify with Hong Kongers who had been hostile to her as an immigrant from socialist mainland China. The old colourists' penchant for exotic things (basically from the West) and their tenacious advocating of such a lifestyle during and after the Cultural Revolution had a great impact on diasporic writers like Chen Naishan and Sun Shufen. It seems that they saw in such persistence a sense of comfort and homesickness, as well as the possibility of resistance against the hostile environment in the host city Hong Kong.

18 Chen Huifen 陳惠芬, *Xiangxiang Shanghai de N zhong fangfa* 想像上海的N種方法 [N Ways of Imagining Shanghai] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2006), 39-40.

19 Chen Huifen, *Xiangxiang Shanghai de N zhong fangfa*, 36.

4 *Re-Legendizing the Shanghai Past*

Sun Shufen also came of good stock. Like Cheng Naishan's forebears, his grandfather Sun Zhizhai 孫直齋 (dates unknown) was a destitute native of Changshu 常熟, Jiangsu province, but later accumulated tremendous wealth from owning hotels, banks, ship companies and land properties in Shanghai. His father Sun Bocheng 孫伯誠 was also owner of bookshops and restaurants, and the founder of Huadong Commercial and Savings Bank. Unfortunately, the family suffered from a drastic downturn after Sun Bocheng's bank had gone bankrupt and they had paid a huge ransom of sixty kilograms of gold to free Sun Zhizhai from kidnappers. Sun Shufen grew up in Shanghai. Although he graduated from the Huadong Political Science and Law College in 1954, he was only assigned a secondary school teacher's post, and he suffered from many hardships during the Cultural Revolution because of his bourgeois family background.

Sun Shufen began to write in the late 1960s and his first novel *Yaba buoji* 啞巴夥計 (The Mute Counterjumper) was published in 1977. In 1978, his second novel *Gusu chun* 姑蘇春 (Spring of Gusu) followed. Both novels write about how Chinese resist the Japanese invasion. Spring of Gusu sold particularly well with 550,000 copies. It did not only bring Sun Shufen fame, but also led him to take writing as a lifelong profession.

Among his family members, Sun Shufen was the last to migrate to Hong Kong in 1993, at the age of sixty. After his arrival in Hong Kong, he contacted the two most famous local publishers Cosmos Books and Crown Publishing House through some friends and secured contracts of publication quickly. Under the sponsorship of Cosmos Books, he published (1) *Shengsi jie* 生死劫 (A Life and Death Disaster; 1994), a biography of the Beijing opera master Zhou Xinfang; (2) the Shanghai Old Dreams series which includes *Molu wangsun* 末路王孫 (The Desperate Nobles; 1994), *Zuoye fengyu* 昨夜風雨 (Last Night's Wind and Rain; 1994) and *Yangchang langzi* 洋場浪子 (Shanghai Prodigal; 1994); (3) the Dream of Prosperity series which includes *Baofa sbijia* 暴發世家 (The Parvenu; 1995), *Fengyu yangchang* 風雨洋場 (The Foreign Field of Wind and Rain; 1996) which is a biography of his grandfather Sun Zhizhai, and *Baizu zhi chong* 百足之蟲 (The Centipede; 1997); (4) *Hei xiao* 黑梟 (The Black Owl; 1995), *Hei dao* 黑道 (The Dark Way; 1995), and (5) three collections of essays, namely *Shanghai de fubua suiyue* 上海的浮華歲月 (The Era of Shanghai Vanity Fair; 2002), *Shanghai de chi he wan le* 上海的吃喝玩樂 (Feasting and Entertainments in Shanghai; 2002) and *Shanghai jiumeng* 上海舊夢 (Old Dreams of Shanghai; 2002). As for Hong Kong Crown, Sun Shufen has produced *Shanghai sheng si lian* 上海生死戀 (Life, Death

and Love in Shanghai; 1995), *Heping fandan zhi jueshi zhi lian* 和平飯店之爵士之戀 (Love of Jazz at the Peace Hotel; 1995), *Wu guoji zhi lian* 無國籍之戀 (Love of No Nationality; 1996) and *Fengyu liren* 風雨儷人 (The Couple in Wind and Rain; 1998). Some of the above works were later reprinted in mainland China. Sun Shufen continued to publish in the mainland simultaneously. For instance, another collection of his essays *Haomen jiumeng* 豪門舊夢 (Dreams of the Nobles; 2002). The last publication of Sun Shufen was perhaps *Zuibou de Mazuka* 最後的瑪祖卡 (The Last Mazurka; 2005) which contains essays about Shanghai heiresses, jazz performers, the Paramount Ballroom, gentlemen and cigars—still a trademark of the ‘old colour’ writing. It was released before Sun Shufen passed away on his Shanghai sickbed on September 2nd, 2005.²⁰

Apparently, Sun Shufen’s production at Cosmos Books mainly deals with three subject matters—espionage, the Shanghai secret societies and his family history. In all cases, the author places prime emphasis on elements of legend. For instance, in *The Desperate Nobles*, he describes how the protagonist Natasha 娜塔莎, a White Russian girl exiled to Shanghai during the World War II period, is surrounded by undercover spies of various foreign countries who try to benefit from their infiltration into China. The story is not merely replete with exciting intrigues and plots, but often set in casinos, brothels, bars and night clubs along Yuyuan 豫園 Road or the Bund. In other words, Sun Shufen re-imagines the old Shanghai through its colorful entertainment industry. It is, therefore, ungrounded for writer *cum* critic Wang Anyi 王安憶 (b1954) to opine that Sun has from time to time portrayed the quotidian experience of his Shanghainese characters in the novel.²¹ The legendary aspect of the metropolis is always in the limelight in Sun Shufen’s works.

As for the works published by Crown, they are all love stories. For instance, *Life, Death and Love in Shanghai* recounts a heartbroken love story from 1950s’ Shanghai. The protagonist Wu Xiaofen 吳曉氛 is married to Zhu Guangyi 朱廣頤. Yet she gradually falls in love with Shen Ye 沈燁 who works as a personal assistant of her father. At the time, Shen Ye is perceived by many as one without a future, due to his politically incorrect family background. But his carefree attitude and lifestyle such as driving around on his Harvey motorcycle and

20 Shen Qionong 沈秋農, »Zhuming Haipai zuojia Sun Shufen« 著名海派作家孫樹荼 [Sun Shufen, Famous Writer of the Shanghai School], *Changshu ribao* 常熟日報 Aug 27, 2009. See <press. idoican.com.cn/detail/articles/20090827132B21/> (last retrieval Feb 29, 2012).

21 Wang Anyi 王安憶, »Qiyue zai ye, bayue zai yu« 七月在野,八月在宇, [In the Wilds in the Seventh Month, And under Shelter in the Eighth Month], in Sun Shufen, *Molu guizu* 末路貴族 (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2008), 27.

singing Western pop songs attract Wu Xiaofen even more. When Zhu Guangyi learns about his wife having an affair with Shen Ye, he takes revenge. On the one hand he accuses Shen Ye for being a rightist, leading to the latter's exile to a remote, obscure village in Anhui Province. On the other hand, he arranges for Wu Xiaofen to migrate to Hong Kong so that she has no chance of reuniting with Shen Ye. Although he follows Wu Xiaofen to Hong Kong later, Zhu Guangyi fails to save his marriage. Eventually, Wu divorces Zhu and migrates to America where she lives with lasting regrets of never meeting Shen Ye again. What is legendary about this story is that it is narrated from the viewpoint of Pei Di'er 裴狄儿, a UC-Santa Barbara graduate who takes up the job of personal assistant offered by Wu Xiaofen in San Francisco. Based on the private journal provided by the old lady, the young man, who has never been to Shanghai, is able to construct piecemeal the metropolis of the past to fit the narrative plot.

Of course, one cannot fully understand Sun Shufen's re-legendization of Shanghai if he does not include his nostalgic essays for discussion. *Old Dreams of Shanghai*, for instance, maintains the element of legend throughout. Not only does the author recall the glory of gambling industry such as horse racing and dog racing at Jing'ansi Road, or of the grandest Western restaurants in Cathay Hotel and other places, but he also describes in details in two essays how the Japanese supported Chinese secret agents to set up their headquarters at Alleys 668 and 749 off Yuyan Road, how they assassinated or tortured to death a great many anti-Japanese Chinese in order to assist the Japanese military in invading China. Another example is *Dreams of the Nobles*. The book even bears a subtitle—*The Remembrance of a Shanghai 'Old Colour'*.²² Sun Shufen disagrees with Cheng Naishan's definition of 'old colour' which is part of the legendary explanation of the term. To him,

the word *kela* is the transliteration of 'carat'. It is professionally used as a unit of measuring diamonds and precious stones. One carat is equivalent to two hundred grams. In present Shanghai people still employ the term to refer to those who possess the knowledge of the 'nobles' life' of the old Shanghai. Since most of them were born into powerful rich families, and had received 'Westernized' education, they witnessed how Chinese and foreigners lived together in the 'ten-mile foreign field', how debauchery, grotesque and gaudy the society was in a flood of red lanterns and green wine. Yet even when they are all bygone now, many events and figures still remain in memory. The author of this book is indeed such an 'old colour.' And all the

22 Sun Shufen, *Haomen jiumeng* 豪門舊夢 (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2002).

eighteen pieces of notes come straight from his memory of what he had seen and experienced in the past.²³

That notwithstanding, Sun Shufen is in the same tune with Chen Naishan as they both stress the materialistic concern which characterizes the 'old colour'. Sun's work *Dreams of the Nobles* comprises essays that report his nostalgic discovery tour of cafés along Avenue Joffre (the present Middle Huaihai 淮海 Road), the Siberian Fur Store, the Airline Night Club on Fumin 富民 Road and so forth, all of which no longer exist today but were famous locations where heiresses, party girls and esquires of the 1940s and 1950s squandered their time and money. The legends of this materialistic class are passionately retold to furnish Sun Shufen's re-imagination of Shanghai from Hong Kong.

5 *Shanghai Disappears Once More*

During my separate interviews with Cheng Naishan and Wu Zheng, both disclosed that they knew each other and Sun Shufen personally. Sun Shufen's elder sister was tutored by Cheng Naishan's mother, and Cheng once approached Wu Zheng's wife for help when she was looking for a job during her second migration to Hong Kong. As a matter of fact, Shanghainese who migrated to Hong Kong in early days tended to live in the North Point 北角 District, where the community of Shanghai origin was formed. Although Wu Zheng announced to me that he had no problem incorporating himself into the Hong Kong society, I find contradiction in his unconscious exclusion of Hong Kongers as characters whenever he wrote. The only exception is perhaps Huang Jinfu, the destitute factory worker we have seen in his first novel *Shanghainese*. Apparently, identity is the key factor to this reaction. Indeed, Chen Naishan even confesses in the preface to her *Shanghai Tango* that she had only lived within the Shanghainese circle during her two migrations to Hong Kong. The exclusion of non-Shanghainese is self-explanatory.

If we may examine Wu Zheng's short story »Fenghua an« (A Sex Scandal) again, which I have discussed before, we will hear the narrator 'I' mentioning:

In recent years, I love finding time and opportunities to return to Shanghai, for I want to find and experience that kind of obscure and fleeting feeling of misplacement [...] which excites as well as disappoints me, which is substantial yet empty. After all, it's like dreaming.²⁴

23 See flyleaf of *Haomen jiumeng*.

24 Wu Zheng, »Fenghua an«, in *Houchuang*, 107.

Is this not the reason why two out of the three writers discussed in this paper had eventually moved back to Shanghai for good? And the remaining one, Sun Shufen, also chose to pass his last day of life in his home city instead of Hong Kong? Whether it was poetic purification, anecdotal excavation or relegendization of Shanghainese experience, they were all but 'home affairs' that help reconstruct the home city for these writers while they felt alienated outside Shanghai. Yet the home city they once lived had become an imagined one. It no longer exists, but only 'revived' in the text to prove their disappearance, the disappearance of home from the eyes of three diasporic writers in their mentally and psychologically remote Hong Kong.²⁵

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25 For a detailed discussion of the three writers' literary treatment of Hong Kong in their works, see Wu Yaozong 吳耀宗 [i.e. Gabriel Wu], »Cong Beijiao dao Jiulong dong: Zai Gang Shanghai zuojia de Xianggang xiangxiang« 從北角到九龍東：在港上海作家的香港想像 [From North Point to Kowloon East: The Imagination of Hong Kong by Hong Kong-based Shanghainese Writers], *Xiandai Zhongwen xuekan* 現代中文學刊 no 17 (Shanghai, 2/2012), 64-71.