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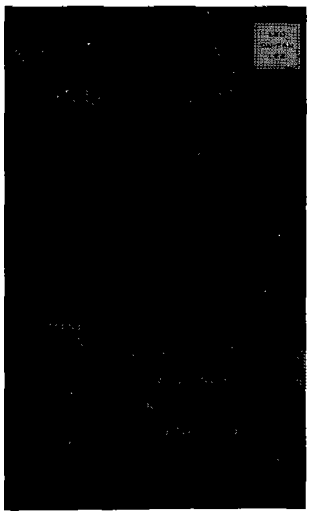
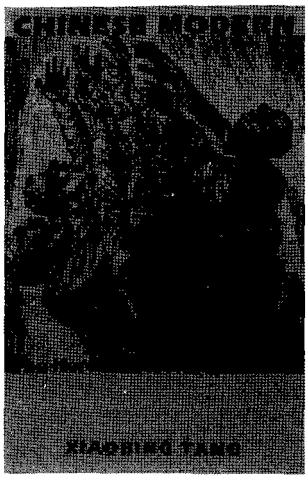
Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945. By Leo Ou-fan Lee. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999. xvii + 409. ISBN 0-67-480551-8 (Paperback).

Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian. By Xiaobing Tang. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. xiii + 380. ISBN 0-82-232447-4 (Paperback).





Exactly what is the modern in China? The nature of Chinese modernity (if I may use this disputed term) is presently under hot debate both within academic culture in the U.S. and in Chinese cultural circles, and the two 400-page tomes under consideration here are recent additions, one from a long-time prolific contributor to Chinese literary studies, and the other from a more recently active but equally prolific scholar. It is difficult to avoid drawing some generation-based conclusions from these two books, although what I mean by *generation* is not necessarily or only the age and era of the scholars but rather the development of scholarship itself over the last thirty years.

While they both contain the word *modern* in their titles, Lee and Tang cover different historical and spatial grounds, and give ideologically and culturally different responses to questions about the modern in China. Lee limits his investigations to Shanghai from 1930 to 1945, although these marked boundaries are by no means coincidental, for they are meant to help the reader understand what

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Lee's view of Chinese modernity really is. Tang's research covers most of the twentieth century, and clearly is concerned with foundational and fundamental issues about the nature of modernity itself. Both scholars use a wide range of historical, theoretical, popular, and literary sources written in Chinese and English, and a few from other languages.

For several months I have been closing my eyes and ears to published and voiced comments about the two books, hoping to contain outside influences and form my own opinion. Yet I have not been able to avoid hearing from many sources that in the scholarly community in general, strong and contradictory opinions are held about the value of the two approaches represented by Lee and Tang. Furthermore, the thorny contemporary politics of comparing the research of a Taiwan-educated senior scholar with that of a mainland-educated junior scholar did not escape me, and therefore it was only with some trepidation that I began to read the books.

Let me begin with Leo Ou-fan Lee's book. Lee's short introduction tells us that he is taking an "insider's point of view" on Shanghai, a city that he believes to be a cultural matrix of Chinese modernity in the 1930s. Although Lee specifies that "insider" here means the use of Chinese sources, he later repeats his claim of being an insider and criticizes Joseph Levenson, who also used Chinese sources in his research, as an intellectually condescending outsider (313-15). Lee did not grow up in Shanghai, nor does he have any fond memories of his first visit there as a child, so exactly what is the nature of his insider status? The answer to this seemingly simple question gives us a key to Lee's scholarship and also, I imagine, one reason why the book may have met with strong criticism: Lee believes that the *xiandai* sensibility created and propounded by literary and cultural modernists in Shanghai, all of whom were under heavy influence from European and American literary modernism, is the beginning of the true and authentic modern in China, or as he puts it, "the very embodiment of Chinese modernity" (xiv). Even more to the point, Lee's studies in Taiwan, where he was involved with the Taiwan literary modernist movement in the founding of the journal *Xiandai wenxue* and the introduction of western literary modernism through its articles and translations, gave him not only a personal affinity (clearly

indicated in the autobiographical structure of his introduction) with this particular definition of the modern, but also a naturalized genealogy that implicitly supports his approach. Furthermore, in an ironical twist, Lee claims that his reading and construction of this western-inflected modernity emerge from a perspective somehow different than more recent "textual strategies, virtuoso readings, and other forms of interventions and subversions" (xv), all of which are based on *western* theories. In this light, what being an insider means is that Lee, hoping to declare his independence from the controlling hand of western theories, believes that the unique combination of his past experience, his training, and his choice of methodologies succeed in making his interpretations more authentically Chinese than those of others.

While I hardly need go over the many possible objections to this approach, all of which are common by now, I find some things to admire here. I couldn't agree more with Lee that not all culture nor all theory-construction takes place in English, a fact often ignored by critics more anxious to insert their own work in a global (western) hierarchy of value than to spend time reading (or hearing or viewing) and writing about what they dismiss as merely local and limited discourses. I too am happy to undermine the implicitly imperialistic underpinnings of theory as it is constructed today by insisting, to the best of my abilities, on the importance of a dialogue with scholars and critics of the past and present working in non-western languages. But by no means should we imagine that a simplistic theory vs. non-theory, authentic vs. non-authentic conceptual structure would help us meet these idealistic goals.

Although Lee includes chapters on Shanghai buildings and public spaces (including architecture, coffee shops, book stores, dance halls, theaters, and the foreign concessions in general), on print culture, and on cinema, the bulk of his book (120-307) is on literary modernism, specifically the work of Shi Zhecun, Liu Na'ou, Mu Shiying, Shao Xunmei, Ye Lingfeng, Eileen Chang, and the journals and books familiar to them. Lee's argument about popular cinema, moreover, is that it is linked to popular fiction, which shapes the tastes and viewing habits of the Chinese audience. This connection between print culture and film is what causes Chinese film to emphasize a well-developed

and foregrounded plot and exaggerated acting, Lee claims, for these are qualities that stories have conditioned the audience to expect. This chapter and a few others, although not completely concerned with literature, still serve to illustrate the literary-cultural environment in which the modernist writers lived and worked, and this fact leads me to believe that despite his attempt to include a cultural studies-type discussion of non-elite culture in his work, Lee's main focus is literary modernism and its implications.

Lee's affinity with and sympathy for literary modernism comes out in a number of ways, but most clearly in his attempt to deal with the issue of cosmopolitanism, mentioned throughout the book but given a separate section, chapter 9, toward the end. Although he knows that the cosmopolitanism available in the International Settlement was the result of imperialism, the issue of unequal power relations recedes as Lee finds that the concessions gave Shanghai the edge over Paris, which was by comparison "less diversified and cosmopolitan" (37). At times I almost felt that Lee was arguing that China was fortunate to have been forced to cede territorial control, for this allowed a modern development that was unattainable in other ways. As Lee explains in his section on Shanghai cosmopolitanism, the ability to see colonialism as cosmopolitanism also comes from his insider position, which provides him with the vantage point of "looking out" (314-15) and brings into view the single most important difference between India and China: the fact that Chinese writers continued to use the Chinese language in education, writing, and so on, while Indian writers turned to English. Even the one modernist writer capable of writing in English, Eileen Chang, always took a Chinese subject position in her fiction, Lee writes. Now it seems that this Chinese subject position is the crucial element of the insider status.

In privileging cosmopolitanism over colonialism, Lee downplays the violence inherent in relationships of unequal power, preferring rather to bring the modernists together with Chinese leftists, Japanese intellectuals, Comintern delegates, French writers, and American journalists in a "vague feeling of internationalist alliance" (322). While it undoubtedly is true that during this time some unusual relationships were forged, it is important to recognize that these different groups had any

number of conflicting ideological goals and motivations, and the internationalist alliance was fragile and fraught with struggle throughout the 1930s and 1940s. And although the material structure of modernity—its colossal department stores, theaters, coffee shops, art deco lobbies, bookstores, and all that was offered in the International Settlement—was enjoyed not only by the rich but by students and intellectuals as well, whole populations were excluded. Perhaps simply viewing these things from afar was part of the emerging modernist lifestyle, although such experience may not loom large in the life of a factory worker, for whom modernity meant something quite different.

I found the section of Lee's book that directly dealt with the modernist writers to be the most interesting part. Lee's discussions come from a deep knowledge of the authors' works and considerable research in texts that are not easily available, as well as fruitful interviews with Shi Zhecun that took place over a number of years. Shi gave Lee detailed information about his early reading material and his environment, and this allows Lee to unravel for us a connected story of modernist interest in developing psychologized characters and plots, in focusing on the sexualized female body, and in evoking the semi-decadent and decadent lifestyle available in Shanghai. Lee's analysis of the female body in the work of Mu Shiying is revealing, for he illustrates the way in which the sexualized woman comes to embody all kinds of male desires—not only those of the body, but also in terms of more generalized desire for fulfillment. The utopianism of this construction has personal, social, and national meanings, and thus the female body offers a kind of "geography" of the desires being produced in this increasingly commodified environment (216). Lee's discussion of the lives and work of Shao Xunmei and Ye Lingfeng gives us a good picture of one understanding of what the modern life should be (decadent), and sheds light on the consumption=modernization formula with which we are all familiar.

To some extent Lee is correct in situating Shanghai as a matrix of modernity with the modernist writers at its core. Many of their preoccupations—a Freudian approach to understanding mental life, the foregrounding of sexuality in identity, a deeply interior, well developed self and self-consciousness—do indeed form the structural framework of what we have accepted as

modern in the twentieth century. Modernity, it follows, is only one: a complex of internal and external characteristics that have their beginning in western Europe and have spread across the world. This all works very well for Lee, because he views this period of "Shanghai's glory" (323) as ending in 1945, being replaced by Hong Kong, reappearing in nostalgic films by Hong Kong directors, and finally, in the late 1980s, undergoing a revival and even developing nostalgia for its own colonial/cosmopolitan past. Yet a crucial lapse exists in this mapping of modernity: the forty-some years between Shanghai's supposed demise and its rebirth disappear from Lee's discussion. Chronologically and conceptually, these years and all of the lives lived, texts written, and films produced in their duration apparently exert no influence. How is that possible? Has the revolutionary period been erased with no trace from China's modern existence? Have none of the concepts or ways of life developed during that time left so much as a tiny mark in the consciousness of Shanghai residents, or does Lee believe that they simply are inconsequential? This refusal to seriously consider as part of modernity a revolutionary culture that is developing rapidly during the time Lee's modernists are working is a huge problem. Even if Lee can make a case for the literary modernists as producing modernity in China, which in itself is a questionable argument, I do not see how he can justify leaving out such a huge and influential chunk of twentieth-century culture.

Before I move on to Tang's book, I want to point out that the lack of a bibliography in Lee's book is truly confounding, for it is impossible to locate a source without finding the footnote and then going to the back to search for the reference.

Tang Xiaobing's book is divided into two parts. The first part discusses four literary texts, by Wu Jianren, Lu Xun, Ding Ling, and Ba Jin, all published from 1906 to 1947. Part Two jumps up to the period immediately preceding the Cultural Revolution and the 1963 play *The Young Generation* by Chen Yun, and then to New Era fiction (Yu Hua and Su Tong, for the most part), the work of the Taiwan writer Xiao Ye, cinema, the new urban culture of daily life, interior decorating (although this chapter focuses on the writer He Dun), and Wang Anyi's fiction. Lee's modernists appear nowhere, and the reason is

immediately apparent: Tang does not believe cultural modernity to have emerged through their work.

Tang sets out his goals clearly in the introduction: using the interpretive framework of the heroic and the quotidian, he wants to show how modernity inspires in us "passions for a utopian future" while simultaneously making us long for a never realized, constantly postponed daily life of fulfillment (1). Tang believes that these two poles, of the heroic and the daily, and the constant, dialectical movement between them constitute the universal and inescapable condition of secular modernity. Another common but less evocative way of saying this would be that modernity demands progress which inspires ideals which are then checked and restrained, in a back and forth movement, by the realities of daily life. I find this idea too familiar and general to function as a thesis, although it works well as a thematic blanket under which Tang can bring together some articles that are sometimes related only very vaguely, as I discuss below. In a near-tautological way, Tang is tracing in China a modernity that can be likewise found and traced in any culture claiming modernity. In this sense, he and Lee have a similar methodology. Sometimes implicitly and at other times explicitly accepting the values of personal development I list above (the Freudian approach, deep self, and sexual identity), Tang also locates and projects a certain kind of person who emerges in a modern environment, no matter where that environment may be in spatial terms.

Yet this is a very different study. Despite the seeming universalism of Tang's two poles—the utopian and the quotidian—he finds revolutionary culture to be central to what he calls Chinese modernity, and revolutionary culture does not necessarily produce the deeply interiorized, psychologically fragmented individual, or at least does not portend to do so (Tang finds that it does produce rather overwhelming anxieties). Even though the goal of persuasive socialist realism and capitalist realism (propaganda and advertisements) is the same—to stimulate our desire for a more fulfilling environment—these two ideologies travel different routes to reach their aims. Only by understanding those paths can we see, for example, that Wang Anyi's fiction is directly aimed at solving a problem, that of excessive faith in heroism, that has developed within the

specific conditions of Chinese modernity. All the way along, we find stunning differences in the strategies writers and filmmakers use as they wrestle with the particular development of modernity in their time and place. And more importantly, Tang states that these differences should figure in our study of modernity at large and should, he believes, strongly influence what we call "theoretical investigation" (6). Like Lee, Tang makes excellent use of scholarship written in Chinese; unlike Lee, he believes this work is theoretical as well as historical.

In terms of explicating Tang's overarching concept, I find the first part of his book to work well together. Sure enough, when I checked the list of previously published work, for Part I only the second chapter on Lu Xun was in the list. For Part II, however, chapters 6-10 all had been published as individual articles. While this earlier publication is a fact of our productivity-driven field and not a problem in itself, I suspect that many of the pre-published chapters originally were not conceived as part of the project. Thus I believe Tang had to develop a very general thesis to cover all of these disparate essays, and therefore we get the heroic/quotidian formula, a dialectic that is hard to deny but not theoretically enlightening for each topic he studies. In a different way, my criticism also could be applied to Lee's book, which would have been more powerful if it limited itself to the central chapters on the literary modernists and the meanings of their world rather than setting out to put these modernists at the crux of Chinese modernity at large.

There is too much to discuss in any detail here. Tang makes a good case for *The Sea of Regret* as an early modernist text that gives us a traumatized individual and centers sexuality as crucial to identity. Through Tang's discussion of Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman," we understand better how he regards literary modernism (here meaning Lu Xun and others, not the *xiandaipai* writers Lee analyzes); it is a transformation of time-consciousness, a critical attitude toward language, and the estrangement of everyday life. Tang recognizes that the Madman is constructed out of values "associated with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in the modern Western intellectual tradition," and from these major thinkers Lu Xun absorbs an interpretive strategy of setting up a hidden meaning behind the signifiers (66). Utopianism and disenchantment are explored in

Lu Xun's "My Old Home," and also in Ding Ling's work, which portrays the political struggle over the revolutionary body and sets up a contrast between the pleasure-seeking liberal body and the disciplined revolutionary body. In Ba Jin we find the tubercular body and Susan Sontag's claim that we moderns like to interpret disease psychologically—although Tang finds that the character Wenxuan in *Cold Nights* is the last of the sick antiheros in Chinese literature for a while, anyway.

Tang ends Part I by stating that what we will see next is a new hero formed by sublimation into national identity, socialist construction, and increased politicization. Still informed with the same utopian/quotidian dialectic, the revolutionary age was, Tang claims, deeply lyrical and fraught with anxieties. I certainly agree that it was lyrical, but if ever there were an overused concept, it is that of anxiety and its cognates in this second part of the book. In Part I we run into the idea occasionally, but it flowers in Part II, when the Chinese population (or is it only the intellectuals?) appears to have been overly *anxious, discontented,* and *uneasy* to the point where the terms almost cease to have any meaning. It is difficult to dispute the fact that elite modern literature and film almost always sets up characters with mental problems that can be called anxieties, and that these anxieties are central to the plot and very structure of the work. Yet I cannot but wish that Tang would adopt a more critical attitude to what I find to be his ahistorical over-reliance on psychological interpretations, shown not only in his thematic insistence on anxieties but also in rather casual use of concepts such as *repression* and *suppression* (the "return of the repressed past" is a common phrase), not to mention the seeming irrelevance of anything in the physical world in determining mental states. I am not sure whether Tang's use of psychological explanations indicates that he believes psychology to be a universal science (in which case I wonder how he would respond to the deconstructions of Freudism carried out by Frederick Crews, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Stanley Fish and many others), or whether he finds it simply to be such a pervasive aspect of all modernities that he has no choice but to see things this way. Perhaps Lee's affinity with literary modernism is here repeated in another form, although there is no autobiographical introduction out of which to extend this

speculation. I also wonder where the Chinese revolutionary term 精神 *jingshen*, usually translated as "spiritual," and often used to describe mental life, has disappeared to—or has it been *suppressed?*—and whether a mentality based on this concept is the same as one based on Freud's ideas.

Tang's emphasis on lyricism and the aestheticization of politics in revolutionary culture is illuminating, and he convincingly explains how one goal of authorities was to convince the young that they are happy. This may help us understand why so many revolutionary films and stories center on the construction of youth as a special category (also a fact of life under capitalism, where youth become a marketing niche). Tang's use of Yu Hua's wonderful story "On the Road at Age Eighteen" to illustrate his idea of residual modernism (or modernism with a level of critical self-consciousness) is perfect, for the story is both elegantly simple and unpretentious, and highly self-conscious of its modernist strategies at the same time. The Taiwan writer Xiao Ye's regionalist imagination and growing freedom from obsession with China is put together with Su Tong's demand for a visually rich past to show how these two writers, both of whom are searching for new perspectives, react to their circumstances in almost opposite ways, Xiao Ye by developing a new collective self-consciousness to provide an alternative to the collective obsession of before, and Su Tong by developing an individualized gaze that stares bug-eyed at the past.

There also are many interesting interpretations of urban culture, film, and so on in the rest of the book but this review article already is too long. I will add one more criticism—that Tang momentarily departs from his consistently refreshing professionalism, emotionally and repetitively attacking Chen Xiaoming with very little in the way of sustained analysis to support him (305). But that is only one page. Otherwise, I thoroughly enjoyed Tang's unraveling of interiority and interior design, and feel his article on Wang Anyi's anti-heroic melancholy will become a classic. Tang's bibliography, although it omits a few entries, makes his book much easier to use than Lee's.

There are many aspects of modernity—economic, military, class and labor-oriented—and more that neither Lee nor Tang

sufficiently work in, although in analyses of culture that would hardly be practical or possible and may run each book—which could, I believe, be fruitfully shortened rather than lengthened—to a thousand pages. They both know that modernity did not take place only in the minds of writers and cultural workers. It should be clear that although I find things to admire and criticize in the work of both Lee and Tang, I sympathize more with Tang's approach. In the framework of China and the world, to delimit cultural modernity as originating with those who simply call themselves modernists ultimately makes little sense, although they certainly were taking up styles and themes they found more modern than anything else. To regard modernity as woven through much of twentieth-century Chinese culture, including its poetic revolutionary period, seems to me to be a more thought-provoking perspective.