

Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: the Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930 - 1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999);

Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

The two works under review here, both concerned with the nature of modernity in China, show the impact of critical theory and the new cultural history on the China field. Compared with South Asian studies, sinology has been slow to yield new methodologies, but when two very different scholars writing on apparently unrelated subjects each eschews modernization in favour of modernity as the point at issue, we know something has happened.

The authors come from different fields and different generations. Leo Ou-fan Lee, who made his name in Chinese literary studies with *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (1973), saw pre-Liberation Shanghai as a child before his family fled to Taiwan. Anthropologist Lisa Rofel embarked on her research in China in 1985, well into the era of "Four Modernizations." In *Shanghai Modern*, Lee looks back over the shoulder of the Maoist years to republican-era Shanghai, China's largest city then and now and certainly the most self-consciously modern. In *Other Modernities*, Rofel sets out to examine the cultural politics of modernity in the late twentieth-century as manifested among women silk workers in Hangzhou, not too far from Shanghai and lying within its orbit of influence. Both studies are premised on an understanding of modernity as a "cultural imaginary," showing the pervasive effects of discourse theory on contemporary scholarship.

Shanghai, arguably the laboratory of Chinese modernity, deserves first attention. In the 1930s, this was a lively, populous, cosmopolitan city, steadily engaged in the production of a new urban culture. The ethos of this culture is well-conveyed in the opening chapters of *Shanghai Modern*, which focus variously on spatial organization, popular print culture, the cinematic milieu, and the circulation of works translated from European languages. In the second half of the book Lee turns to his established metier, the exegesis of Chinese literary works, although with reference to not particularly familiar writers. In place of Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Mao Dun and other doyens of republican-era writing, the reader here is presented with a refreshingly different cast. Eileen Chang, of course, is famous, but the works of Shi Zecun, Liu Na'ou. Mu Shiyong, Shao Xunmei and Ye Linfeng have rarely been discussed in English-language publications.

The relationship of the works of these various writers to Shanghai's modernity differs from case to case but can be summed up as their showing the effects of European thinkers and writers (Baudelaire, Freud, George Moore, Oscar Wilde); evoking the urban landscape (a feature of fiction then certainly less than a century old); and presenting the city as a sexual encounter. Sexual

encounters specific to place were not new to Chinese fiction: Wu Jingzi's eighteenth-century novel, *Rulin waishi* (Unofficial history of the literati) provides examples. What marks their modernity is the pronouncedly modern character of the women portrayed: their hair, their eyes, their breasts, particularly but not only as depicted by Liu Na'ou, all proclaim them to be worryingly new women before whom the male observer (Liu himself, no doubt) wilts.

Lee is at his strongest in discussing the inter-textuality of the various works he discusses in this section of the book, showing their relationship to both the European and Chinese literary traditions. The fact that Chinese writers remained firmly anchored within the world of Chinese letters while simultaneously taking an eager and receptive interest in European provides him with fuel for the argument put in his penultimate chapter: that "Chinese writers eagerly embracing Western cultures in Shanghai's foreign concessions" do not constitute a case of Homi Bhabha's "colonial mimicry" but were simply "a manifestation of a Chinese cosmopolitanism, which is another facet of Chinese modernity." (313) In essence, Lee conceives of Shanghai as a confident, outward-looking site of modernity, perhaps subjected to, but by no means shaped by, "the colonial gaze."

Rofel takes us into quite different terrain, explored by different means. Her study of Hangzhou silk workers shows the anthropologist at work in the field: watching, interviewing, conversing, reflecting, theorizing, keeping her own position as the foreign observer steadily in her own and the reader's mind. Her interest is fundamentally in identity and choices, which she finds to be both historically formed and subject to re-formation in the context of shifting discourses of politics, labour, and sexuality. Outlooks, social networks and political behaviour on the shop floor vary, she observes, in accordance with cohort. Women who reached maturity in the early post-Liberation years differ from the "lost generation" of the Cultural Revolution" who in turn differ from the postsocialist generation.

In documenting all this, Rofel insists a bit too often on "diversity" and "multiplicity," as though the lesson against essentialism had not well and truly been learned by now; but she writes engagingly, with an ability to evoke the presence of her interlocuteurs and the dynamics of the social interactions she describes. Thanks to this characteristic of the book, the little world of silk-weaving in Hangzhou emerges clearly to view: the physical environment, the overlapping and contested hierarchies of power, the many discontents and small *pleasures* of life of women, and some men, subsisting on the periphery of the global economy, are all richly conveyed.

Although Rofel asserts that gender is central to her project, it is a slight failing in this thoughtful study that it does not remain steadily at the centre of her concerns. It may well be, as she argues in the introduction, that gender is "imbricated" in all social processes, but the point of highlighting it must surely

be to enlighten the reader as to how it is imbricated. A chapter on factory space, although referring the reader back to gender at its conclusion, focuses on technologies of discipline and the historico-cultural specificities of Foucault's "panoptic gaze" with little reference to the gendering of space. That the space was "gendered" is clear from her earlier discussion of the sexual division of labour in the factory, but her intellectual interest in this chapter wanders away from gender theory, or even "gendered yearnings" into other domains. Here, as in the book as a whole, she tries to do a little too much: the anthropology of modernity, feminist theory, Foucauldian discourse, theories of modernity, are all up for consideration. These are, of course, interrelated theoretical domains, but the nexus is not always made apparent and the reader (or this reviewer, at least) has to keep quite a lot in mind as she is taken on the journey through Zhenfu factory.

This is not to say that a project of explaining modernity via gender variables is untenable. To the contrary, the case for gender as a major organising principle in the construction of modernity is strongly if less explicitly supported by Lee's study, which is rich in relevant material. The chapter on print culture draws attention to the pervasive presence of various types of "new woman" in popular publications; to a discourse of domesticity; and to fashion, the *sine qua non* of the modern habitus; some of these facets of urban culture are picked up again in the chapter on cinema. In the second half of the book, sex everywhere makes its presence felt. Shanghai in the eyes of beholders is not only a place of sexual encounter, but also one which is explained via such encounters.

Lee's examination of these various facets, manifestations, and readings of urban culture deserved richer historical and historiographical contextualization. *Shanghai Modern* is surprisingly light in its references to the relevant scholarly literature, which might explain the unusual absence of a bibliography at the book's end. Academic work can be too laden with references, and a writer too much burdened with the thoughts of others, but connections, surely, need to be made for the sake of the reader and the work alike. Very little of the published work on gender relations in republican-era China has been utilised, despite Lee's lengthy forays into this domain; and Sherman Cochran's *Big Business in China* (1980), which devotes some attention to cigarette advertising in calendar posters, surprisingly fails to get mention in the extended discussion of these posters. Even more surprisingly, Lee omits any reference at all to the state, which was certainly weaker in the 1930s than in the period studied by Rofel but was by no means absent from the scene. Cinema, literature and gender relations in Shanghai were all affected by the KMT, and print culture in general was, if not transformed, then certainly taken in new directions by the New Life Movement propaganda machine.

This lack of wider reference has serious implications in the chapter on "Shanghai Comopolitanness," where Lee mounts an argument for a Chinese

modernity unburdened by the weight of colonialism. He mentions, without resolving it, the problem posed by the fierce anti-foreignism which finally led to the end of the Western presence in China. This latter sentiment was not limited to Mao and his followers but was manifested across the spectrum of Chinese political positions. Whence arose the deep feelings of national humiliation among Chinese people, if not from at least a “semi-colonial” condition? Zhu Ziqing, who is not among the writers Lee discusses but was their contemporary, wrote an essay in which he related his experience of sitting in a train carriage opposite a young English boy: the effect of the colonial gaze is powerfully conveyed. A closer engagement on Lee’s part to the existing scholarly literature would have added to his discussion and might have led to different conclusions. Homi Bhabha, whom he does cite, has not considered the niceties of the Chinese case; Joseph Levenson, whom he also takes to task, was writing before the rise of postcolonial theory made its impact on the China studies. Contemporary scholars working in the China field (e.g. Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History From the Nation*, [1995]) have preceded Lee in speculating on the interrelated questions of imperialism, colonialism, nationalism and modernity in the Chinese context. It is in this literature that his provocative discussion of Shanghai’s modernity needed to be located.

To compare the two works under review in some ways serves little purpose. They were inspired by different interests and written, perhaps, for slightly different audiences. Each brings new material and fresh insights to the field of Chinese studies in the English-speaking world. Both, however, will be consulted by readers interested in pursuing the question of Chinese modernity, and on this issue Rofel’s attention to theories of modernity needs to be borne in mind by readers of Lee’s book. At the same time, Lee’s focus on republican-era Shanghai is a reminder of the renewed capacities of China’s largest city as a producer of the discourse of modernity in the post-Mao era. How did the Hangzhou women silk-workers place themselves in relation to Shanghai? Did Xiao Ma fondly imagine herself emulating Shanghai sophistication when she appeared before Rofel in her fur coat, with hair swept up? (223) Place is under-represented as a trope of identity in Rofel’s study. It is the rare book, however, which answers all questions, and despite the disparity in their fields of purview, these two works might fruitfully be read in conjunction by those in search of China modern.

Antonia Finnane  
University of Melbourne