



# Hello, Shanghai

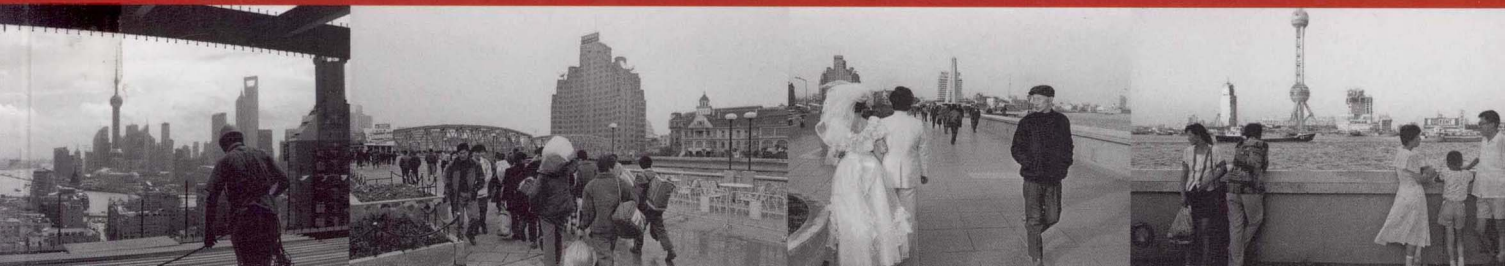
嗨，上海

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# Hello, Shanghai

**A History of Everyday Life in the  
Reform Era, 1978-2009**

**Author** Yang Xiaoneng

**Photography** Gong Jianhua

献给我的母亲，一个老上海

For my mother, who was born in Shanghai

# 嗨，上海

1978 - 2009 百姓生活史

上海文艺出版集团  
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**Aerial view of the Bund of twenty-two years ago**

The Bund, Huangpu District

1988

二十二年前的外滩

上海外滩

1988



# Hello, Shanghai

Yang Xiaoneng

It is a common sentiment to seek out memories of the past as a means of conveying the long, wonderful culture of one's hometown. To pursue, recollect, and explain the history of Shanghai over the last few decades also poses less daunting challenges than tracing the source of thousands of years of premodern history. Shanghai's history and the cultural differences between northern and southern China are essential to understanding the city's past and present. Open a book on the history of civilization in China, and you will be staggered by the dominance of the North China Plain cultures and the emphasis given to the heyday of the Han and Tang dynasties. This is what historians call mainstream Chinese civilization. Prior to modern history, the region around Shanghai was seen as a barbaric area, and indeed it was a corner often overlooked in historical records. Although the sedimentation that created the habitable land of the present-day city of Shanghai dates back only a thousand years, archaeologists have demonstrated that the city's environs were occupied by some of China's most ancient settlements, including the Majiabang culture (7000-6000 years ago), the Songze culture (5900-5300 years ago), and the Liangzhu culture (5300-4000 years ago). The people of these societies were already growing rice, establishing the foundation for the present-day Shanghainese diet; drilling vertical wells to obtain drinking water, thereby ensuring the stability and hygiene of their water supply; firing exquisite pottery vessels of different forms and functions that would challenge even contemporary potters; and gradually developing refined, polished jade objects, thus becoming one of the centers of prehistoric jade production. The advanced nature of prehistoric cultures in the Shanghai area (the Liangzhu culture in particular) rivals the prehistoric cultures of the North China Plain; but several cultural elements were also absorbed by neighboring cultures and afterward by northern states, thereby contributing to the formation and development of Chinese civilization. Several theories have sought to account for the sudden collapse of the Liangzhu culture, but the cause remains a mystery.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Wu and Yue cultures were influential during the late Bronze Age, for a long period the Shanghai region performed a quietly marginal role. Beginning in the Song (960-1279) and Yuan dynasties (1279-1368), however, the economy of the Jiangnan region (the Yangtze delta) quickly developed, and the Shanghai region profited. A county was established in the region in 1292 (during the Yuan dynasty). Under the rule of the Jiajing emperor during the Ming dynasty, city walls and moats were built around the county seat in 1553 to defend against Japanese pirates. Works of art excavated from the Yuan and

<sup>1</sup>For the contributions of Chinese archaeology to rewrite the history of Chinese civilization, see Xiaoneng Yang, *New Perspectives on China's Past: Chinese Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, London and New Haven, 2004; *Lingyizhong gushi (An Alternative History)*, Beijing, 2008.

Ming tombs in Shanghai are equal in quality to those from the Ming-dynasty Ding Imperial Mausoleum near Beijing.

Shanghai's position as an international metropolis was established gradually over the course of only a hundred years, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, when Western powers arrived on Shanghai's shores<sup>2</sup>. In a remarkably short time, Shanghai has emerged as an international commercial metropolis; the city's economic and political importance rivals that of Beijing. The two cities are, however, profoundly different, reflected not only in spatial and temporal differences (Beijing is an ancient city in North China while Shanghai is a young city in South China), but also dissimilarities in political and cultural associations. Beijing has accumulated a long imperial history as well as the traces of indigenous civilizations; it is permeated with the power of having once been an imperial residence and political center, and occasionally betrays evidence of the Continental Silk Road and ancient northern cultures. Shanghai, by contrast, is the product of the fusion of modern Chinese and Western cultures, the combination of a mercantile economy and urbanite customs. Shanghai is a quintessential hybrid, a child of mixed heritage, the perfect test, perhaps, of Darwin's theories of evolution. Shanghai's special heritage and hybrid background have been perfectly demonstrated by its recent modern history. Who could have guessed that a *shikumen* house in the French Concession would become the meeting place of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party? Even though Shanghai had a relatively late start in the process of China's Reform and Opening-Up, the city's development has surpassed that of other regions. Shanghai as a cultural phenomenon is attested to by its urban design and architecture: a mixture of the Bund, Western houses, *shikumen* residences, and *longtang* alleys form a sharp contrast to the city wall, palace, *siheyuan* courtyard homes, and *hutong* alleyways of Beijing. There are many disparities between Beijing and Shanghai: imperial and common, political capital and commercial metropolis, closed and open, indigenous culture and foreign influence. Beijing culture and the Shanghai culture are the crystallization of these similarities and differences.

## 1. Shanghai Culture and the Concession Phenomenon

As its commerce, industry, and the economy thrived, Shanghainese culture, based on the fusion of Western and local, traditional and modern, elegant and vulgar, also rapidly gained influence. During the late Qing dynasty and the early Republican period, through artists who came to Shanghai to make



**A *shikumen* alley from 1916**

East Second Alley, Huileli, Jing'an District  
1995

1916年的石库门

静安区会乐里东二弄  
1995

<sup>2</sup>For the history of Shanghai, see Xiong Yuezhi, ed., *Shanghai tongshi* (*The Entire History of Shanghai*), 15 vols., Shanghai, 1999.

a living, such as Ren Bonian (1840-1895) and Wu Changshuo (1844-1927), painting became freer in style and sought sources in the past while grasping the present; some artists endeavored to combine Chinese and Western sources. Even as they catered to the taste of the new urbanite merchant class, they also imparted a modern character to traditional painting. These artists have conventionally been called the “Shanghai School (haipai).” Concurrently, southern Peking Opera, which absorbed the best of regional opera, also introduced concepts from Western theater. This style, which emphasized the reflection of life and promoted the popularization of Peking Opera, was termed the “Shanghai School” as well.<sup>3</sup> The term and concept of a “Shanghai School” afterward extended to novels, movies, culture, society, and several other arenas; it became the all-inclusive, trademark of the customs and practices of the Shanghai region.<sup>4</sup> In spite of this, at first the term “Shanghai style” had slightly disparaging connotations: it was a term that orthodox and conservative gentlemen used to describe a culture that was heavily nonconformist, transgressive, haphazardly combining East and West, brimming with Westernized openness, exaggerated, unreliable, vulgar, and commercial in style. This term has only gradually assumed positive connotations.<sup>5</sup>

Today, the defining characteristics of Shanghai culture are often described as “hundred rivers flowing into the sea, preserving and integrating the best of each,” including the convergence and blending of immigrants and different cultures in Shanghai, as well as the pluralism, initiative, and openness of Shanghai culture. However, what marks Shanghainese culture of its age is the connection to developments in Western culture—the modern and international aspect of the integration of China and the West. It is precisely because Shanghai culture possesses these modern and avant-garde characteristics that, in the nineteen-thirties and forties, Shanghai culture led the way for the development of modern culture and social customs within China.

In the last few years, it has been fashionable among scholars to use “treaty-port culture” to explain the source of Shanghai culture; although the term has a certain logic, but under further contemplation, it does not necessarily tell the entire story. Before 1949, Shanghai was organized around the foreign concessions and the Chinese quarter. The International Settlement headed by the British and Americans occupied the Huangpu and Jing’an areas, while the Hongkou and Yangpu areas, which were originally occupied by the British and Americans, became the Japanese sphere of influence. The French Concession controlled the Xuhui and Luwan districts, and the Chinese quarter included Nanshi, Zhabei, Baoshan, and other neighboring counties. For a long period, the concessions were fortunate in being able to avoid the effects of war; their surroundings were comfortable and expansive, and infrastructure (including gas, electricity, and running water) was relatively complete.<sup>6</sup> Gentry, merchants, officials, scholars, white-collar workers, as well as gangsters, petty criminals,

<sup>3</sup>For related historical and cultural background, see Xiong Yuezhi and Zhang Min, *Wan Qing wenhua, Shanghai tongshi*, vol. 6, Shanghai, 1999, pp. 391-453; Chen Bohai, ed., *Shanghai wenhua tongshi*, vol. 2, Shanghai, 2001, pp. 1712-1743.

<sup>4</sup>Regarding the newspapers, movies, cultures, plays and fine arts before 1949, see Shanghai shi wenshiguan and Shanghai shi renmin zhengfu canshishi—Wenshi ziliao gongzuo wenyuanhui, ed., *Shanghai difang shiliao* (5), Shanghai, 1986; Wenhui chubanshe, *Haipai wenhua congshu*, Shanghai, 2007—.

<sup>5</sup>For the summary of the meanings of the term haipai, see Xue Liyong, *Shanghai xianhua suiyou*, Shanghai, 2005, pp. 206-210.

<sup>6</sup>For gas, electricity, and running water during that period, see Shanghai shi dang’anguan, *Dang’an lide Shanghai*, Shanghai, 2006, pp. 147-163.



**Later-period shikumen houses**

Alley 906, Xinzha Road, Fukangli, Jing'an District  
1996



**后期石库门**

静安区福康里新闻路906弄  
1996

and prostitutes successively entered the concessions. After the insurgency of the Small Dagger Society (1853-1855), and the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) thereafter, as well as several battles before and after the Second World War, this aspect of the concessions gradually changed. Numerous refugees entered the concessions, causing an increase in population density and a deterioration in living conditions, creating a situation in which the rich and poor crossed paths. Nonetheless, the wealthy and Westerners had their own defined residential areas and did not interact with the poor. Within Shanghai culture, the mainstream representatives of the concessions were the upper and middle classes.<sup>7</sup> Those who lived in the Chinese quarters included the blue-collar workers, small business owners, peddlers, suburban peasants, and the middle- and low-income classes; they truly reflected fundamental Shanghai culture. The primary part of Shanghai proper was built on the fields outside of the county seat of old Shanghai, centered around the foreign settlements and concessions. In 1912-1914 the city wall of the old county (the Nanshi area) was torn down and joined to the new city; the arrangement of the new city was open in style, very different from the old city, which was surrounded by the traditional city wall.<sup>8</sup>

The formation of Shanghai culture is closely linked to its particular immigrant culture and specific historical environment. The lure of commercial opportunities and the desire to improve their circumstances compelled many Chinese and foreigners to flock to Shanghai. Most of them were young and energetic, full of an adventuresome spirit. Making a living and commercialism were closely linked for them: selling goods, selling houses, selling paintings, selling writing, selling knowledge, selling power.... Utility played the leading role: if you wanted to become an official, then you went to Beijing. Doing business required trust and negotiation, securing one's own best interests; frauds and swindlers did not stay in business long. To work with foreigners required consulting international regulations; related procedural and operational standards were adopted as new principles. Consequently, the absorption of Western civilization and capitalism was a natural process, which entered and influenced the lives, culture, and practices of the Shanghainese. Commercial practices informed much of what became Shanghai culture. Westerners and the Chinese each had their own original spoken and written language, habits, and tradition. Although Westerners used their special rights and dominant position to enter Shanghai, deeply-rooted Han Chinese culture was never assimilated, while foreign cultures were also never fully integrated into Han Chinese culture. The result of this was that foreign and Han Chinese culture mutually influenced each other, and coexisted. Through Chinese and foreign immigrants who came to make a living, Chinese and foreign cultures in Shanghai, particularly the conflict and integration that occurred in the strange melting pot of the concessions, Shanghai culture formed. One is reminded of the fact that, under the Ming-Qing dynastic transition, the victors forced the Han Chinese to shave their hair and change their customs, but in the end they also learned from Han culture, and were Sinicized.

<sup>7</sup>Zhou Wu and Wu Guilong, *Wan Qing shehui, Shanghai tongshi*, vol. 5, Shanghai, 1999; Chen Xulu, "Shanghai zujie yu Zhongguo jindai shenhui xinchendaixie," in his *Chen Xulu xueshu wencun*, Shanghai, 1990, pp. 713-715.

<sup>8</sup>The Shanghai history was called "a history outside the walled city," see Cao Juren, *Shanghai chunqiu*, Shanghai, 1996, p. 9.

## The newcomers—migrant workers

The Bund, Huangpu District  
1994

外来打工者——新移民

黄浦区外滩

1994



A weak China was bullied, and concession territories were ceded. Shanghai gradually developed into one city with three hybridized administrative systems (Manchu Qing-Republican government, International Settlement, and French Concession). The concessions possessed everything, but it was a society without sovereignty. The open boundaries and free markets excited competition, and foreign powers used their influence to swiftly occupy and penetrate Shanghai. In rapid succession, British, American, French, German, Japanese, and other Great Powers opened foreign trading companies in Shanghai, but the first to profit were the British and Americans, who had originally obtained extravagant profits through the opium smuggling trade. In 1847 Shanghai had already replaced Guangzhou as the largest opium smuggling port. In 1865, HSBC Bank was established in Shanghai, becoming the first main office of a foreign bank in Shanghai. In the 1930s, the architecture of Shanghai's Bund was almost entirely occupied by banking institutions. During the Republican period, the head offices of the four large banks (Central, China, Communications, and Agricultural Banks) were all located on the Bund, and Shanghai had truly become an economic and financial center. The peculiar situation was that of a small government and a relatively free market; in the concessions, other than the Municipal Council, most of the public organizations were commercial associations,

professional associations, and native-place associations. Banking groups and native-place associations not only provided powerless individuals with the power of an emerging commercial network and mutual assistance; they also established in a pluralistic society a more equitable environment for negotiation. The pluralistic nature of the market formed a multilevel commercial society; cigarette shops and boiled water shops, through management by individual entrepreneurs, became the convenience stores on the street, and then became part of the customs of *longtang* alleyways. Loan sharks and second-hand landlord, through intermediary methods, formed a broker class, while banking compradors and capitalists tried to control the market. The developmental model of Shanghai's concessions encouraged commercial development and the trend towards mercantilism. The concessions adopted Western civilization and its trade practices; Shanghai birthed commercial culture and its corresponding modern service industries.<sup>9</sup>

In Shanghai, the concessions were the gathering place for the capitalist class, who sought modernity and amusement, meticulously kept up their high-rolling lifestyles, and judged people by their appearance. The style in which they led their lives was termed the “foreign faction” and a marker of “petty bourgeois sentiment.” The commercial culture of the concessions diminished the respect that had hitherto been accorded to intellectuals, and the humanistic integrity of intellectuals clashed with capitalism. They were compelled to turn their knowledge, talents, and wisdom into commercial objects in order to express their thoughts and to realize their lofty ambitions. In the first half of the twentieth century, the literary scene in Shanghai was particularly lively. The literary men who lived cramped lives in *tingzijian* studio apartments described social reality, and Lu Xun (1881-1936) gave literature a new voice. Countless literary societies were formed; schools of literature appeared and divided; publishing houses were numerous: the two earliest great publishers in China, the Commercial Press and Zhonghua Press, both started in Shanghai. While they faced the challenges of colonialism and commercialization, they also guided the way for a new tide—cultural commerce.<sup>10</sup>

The concessions were considered embodiments of “national shame,” but they were a window through which China came into contact with Western modern civilization. Their existence promoted the progression of Shanghai's urbanization as a city full of Western color, and also provided a nursery for the fullest development of Shanghai's unique culture. Whether one uses the perspective of urbanization or that of Shanghai culture to investigate the defining characteristics of the city's modern society, the history of the concessions cannot be ignored. The concessions are a historical phenomenon; their role in the development of Shanghai culture cannot be underestimated, since immigrants and the process of exchange and integration between Chinese and Western cultures are truly the foundation for the formation of Shanghai culture.

<sup>9</sup>For more information, see Chen Zhengshu, *Wan Qing jingji, Shanghai tongshi*, vol. 4, Shanghai, 1999, pp. 116-148, 421-494; Pan Junxiang, et al., *Minguo jingji, Shanghai tongshi*, vol. 8, Shanghai, 1999, pp. 136-171; Luo Suwen and Song Zuanyou, *Minguo shehui, Shanghai tongshi*, vol. 9, Shanghai, 1999, pp. 207-269.

<sup>10</sup>Xu Min, *Minguo lishi, Shanghai tongshi*, vol. 10, Shanghai, 1999, pp. 30-44 and 107-119.



**Multipurpose longtang**  
No. 481, Taixing Road,  
Jing'an District  
1995

多功能弄堂

静安区泰兴路481号  
1995

## 2. Shanghai of the Past and Her Historic Architecture

The Shanghainese are from everywhere. In 1945, foreign residents of Shanghai came from nearly 40 countries; at its height, the foreign population numbered more than 120,000 people.<sup>11</sup> According to the 1948 census, of the total population, only 15%, or approximately 750,000, were born in Shanghai; 85% were immigrants from Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces and other provinces and cities, numbering approximately 4.1 million people.<sup>12</sup> As a place where Chinese and Western culture merged, Western missionaries, foreign refugees, taipans of foreign companies, adventurers, Chinese compradors, intellectuals and scholars, small business owners and peddlers, landlords who had fallen on hard times in the countryside, as well as all elements of society's underbelly.... Various types of groups congregated here, wanting to rid themselves, to the greatest degree possible, of old conventions and customs, feudal ties and fetters, and sought to use the independent, internationalized kingdom of the concessions as a space to survive, throwing all their energies into improving their living conditions.

If early immigrants mostly had the consciousness of drifters and people just passing through,<sup>13</sup> later immigrants largely made Shanghai their home. Although it is possible to

<sup>11</sup>See Shanghai shi wenshiguan and Shanghai shi renmin zhengfu canshishi—Wenshi ziliao gongzuo wenyuanhui, ed., *Shanghai difang shiliao* (1), Shanghai, 1982, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup>Shi Xuanyuan, ed., *Shanghai 700 nian*, Shanghai, 2000, p. 225. As for foreign denizens and immigrants, see Luo Suwen and Song Zhuanyou, *Minguo shehui, Shanghai tongshi*, vol. 9, Shanghai, 1999, pp. 302-437.



distinguish immigrants who settled in Shanghai at an early period from those who arrived later (such as those who came before or after 1949), after they set down their roots, they became Shanghainese. In terms of greater China, the overall environment of economy, culture, and living conditions in twentieth-century Shanghai were relatively superior, breeding a high degree of tendency that Shanghainese were reluctant to be away from Shanghai. Unless it was absolutely imperative, few Shanghainese moved to other places. Shanghai's population rapidly increased, but residential construction could not keep pace, leading to a leap in housing density. It was not rare to see multiple generations squeezed into cramped rooms and garrets; living spaces for individuals and families shrank to the limit. To live in this way, one had to resort to whatever methods one could use, each drawing upon all of one's abilities and resources. In every corner one could see the organization and arrangement achieved by racking one's brains and creatively using space to the utmost. Shanties could be built on small, narrow roof terraces, or an entire family could squeeze into a *tingzijian* studio, and courtyards and kitchens could be converted into living quarters. Clothing and miscellaneous items, hung above *longtang* alleyways, were scattered all over. In these tiny places, beds were squeezed next to other beds, and the lives of generations were separated by merely a curtain. Within these simple, cramped spaces, mothers and daughters-in-law, brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters-in-law lived in the same room. In the daytime, a table and chairs were brought out, and at night the table and chairs were folded away in order to make way for the three planks that made up a bed. At any given time, on one side someone might be eating, while on the other side someone might be using the chamber-pot, quarreling, making love, or sleeping, all of which was limited to one room. It was as though individual space had been lost. Personal privacy had become a rare luxury. This established “beauty is functionality” as a pragmatic attitude toward life and the aesthetic ideology of material culture.

Even so, the Shanghainese never lost their love of life, and the sea of people was happy and harmonious. All public spaces that could be used were turned into daily life “public halls”: the coal stove in the morning, the toilets, baths in the open; cooling oneself bare-chested, cooking side-by-side, eating and living on the street, selling goods from roadside stalls, looking at others from neighboring windows, whispering to each other—all formed a special practice of the cultural and human landscape, in which “it is good just to be alive.” Many of the *longtang* alleys became multifunctional clubhouses, guesthouses, hospitals, small factories, public restrooms... everything was there. During the Cultural Revolution, crowding in Shanghai reached an unprecedented density. The sumptuous housing districts where the Westerners and wealthy had resided could not avoid these pressures. As the residential population increased, factories and other organizations moved in, a great number of unrelated persons squeezed into formerly single-family luxurious residences, sharing in the legacy of the capitalist class. The gardens and Western homes, once quiet

<sup>13</sup>Rhoads Murphey, *Shanghai, Key to Modern China*, Cambridge, 1953. It was translated and published in Shanghai in 1986, p. 10.