

Shanghai Re(defined): Puxi through the Centuries

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Along the west bank of the Huangpu River, Old Shanghai meets its unfurling present.

Streams of tourists, families, and joggers pass through here. An American couple begins to vlog their journey, switching between panoramic shots of the river and their grins. A small child swallowed by her yellow puffer jacket trudges along with her grandparents until she convinces them to stop at a Coca-Cola truck. Students take photos in front of the Neoclassical, Renaissance, and Art Deco architecture lining the bank, discussing their final history project. Nearby, a wedding is about to take place.

This is Puxi, famous for its iconic stretch of protected waterfront called the Bund, or *waitan* in Chinese, meaning embankment.

Traffic slows as a small crowd forms to watch a trio of youngsters equipped with bionic boots, some hybrid of trampoline shoes and roller-skates. They launch upwards with arms outstretched,

suspended in air against the backdrop of skyscrapers.^{5/1} The moment passes, and they land on their sleek metal blades.



Three young people wearing bionic boots on the Shanghai Bund jump in the air while bystanders observe. In the background, the Pudong skyline is visible. Unknown photographer, image published in an article from China Today magazine, January 2008.

One teenager, facing away from the others, leans towards water. Behind her is the Bund, its European aesthetic once considered the beating heart of Shanghai. Her eyes, however, cast forward to Pudong, where commerce, entertainment, and finance advance at brisk pace.

The American couple pauses in their survey of the Bund to snap a selfie. Centered in their frame is the star of Pudong—the 468 meter tall Orient Pearl TV Tower.² One of the top attractions at the Bund is getting to “appreciate high rises across the Huangpu River,” according to the popular tourism site Travel China Guide.³ The appearance of the Bund has not notably changed since its heydays,

¹ *Bionic boots youngsters enjoy the view from a sightseeing platform along the Bund*, 2008, in Xiwen Zhang, “Shanghai--China’s Most Internationalized Metropolis,” *China Today*, January 2008, 58.

² “Oriental Pearl Radio & TV Tower,” Travel guides, *Shanghai Highlights* (blog), n.d., <https://www.shanghaihighlights.com/shanghai-sightseeing/oriental-pearl-tv-tower.htm>.

³ “The Bund Shanghai,” Travel guides, *Travel China Guide* (blog), June 29, 2020, <https://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/shanghai/bund.htm>.

but this former “billion-dollar skyline”⁴ is now eclipsed by its steel counterpart.

Pudong represents Shanghai of today, while Puxi remembers its colonial past.

In the early 20th century, the Bund swung onto the Western stage as fashionable, modern yet romantic—a must-see destination. As early as 1904, foreign handbooks promoted the Bund as the first spot for anyone arriving in the city, describing it as “one of the most interesting, famous, and handsome thoroughfares in the world.”⁵ As the reputation of the Bund grew to mythical heights, so did Shanghai.

By the 1930s, Shanghai earned monikers such as “Paris of the East,” and “New York of the West,” deemed the “most cosmopolitan city in the world.”⁶ This vision of Shanghai seemed to be everywhere—beautiful women in faux-traditional Chinese qipaos accompanied their husbands dressed in Western suits,⁷ perfect blends of exotic and contemporary. Jazz drifted through the lobbies of luxurious hotels situated on the Bund, catering to an ever-expanding clientele in a city oozing with wealth. At the Renaissance-style Palace Hotel, guests welcomed at the “for men-only” bar were promised “no Parisian lenience here, for the female of the species.”⁸

Even for those who could not afford the expenses of an evening out on the Bund, they could admire its cosmopolitanism in the many

⁴ California Directory Association, ed., *Tourist Guide to Shanghai - North China*, 1930th ed. (The Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels, Ltd., n.d.), 15.

⁵ Rev. C. E. Darwent, *Shanghai: A Handbook for Travellers and Residents to the Chief Objects of Interest In and Around the Foreign Settlements and Native City* (London and Aylesbury, England: Hazell, Watson and Viney LD, 1904), 1.

⁶ *All About Shanghai and Environs: A Standard Guide Book*, 1934th–35th ed. (160 Avenue Edward VII - Shanghai: The University Press, 1934), 1.

⁷ *Shanghai Deco*, Documentary, 2017, https://fod-infobase-com.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/p_ViewVideo.aspx?xtid=154806.

⁸ California Directory Association, *Tourist Guide to Shanghai*, 15.

advertisements that employed its image. In one poster,⁹ a young Chinese woman wearing a floral printed qipao reclines in her seat with a lit cigarette poised in her left hand. To her right are horses on the track, combining two tokens of pleasure: gambling and drugs. In the background is the Bund waterfront, distinguished by its Custom House bell tower—listen closely to hear “Big Ching” chiming out Western melodies on quarter hours.¹⁰



A Chinese woman donning a qipao holds a cigarette in front of the Bund promenade. Horses gallop to her right. Unknown artist, image listed as a 1930s cigarette advertisement in David Koren’s biography of Shanghai.

The amenities that Europeans and Americans delighted in at the Bund were chiseled out over decades, beginning in the 1840s when

⁹ *Cigarette Advertisement from the 1930s*, 1930s, in David Koren, “Shanghai: The Biography of a City,” in *Landscape Biographies*, ed. Jan Kolen, Johannes Renes, and Rita Hermans (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 253–82, 270, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt15r3x99.14>.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “A Big Ben with Chinese Characteristics: The Customs House as Urban Icon in Old and New Shanghai,” *Urban History* 33, no. 1 (2006): 65–84, 68.

Britain took over Shanghai during the First Opium War. China signed the Treaty of Nanking to end the war, opening up five harbors to trade with Western victors, who had long desired China's lucrative market.¹¹ At the Shanghai harbor, implementation of "extraterritoriality" allowed foreigners to live according to their own rules, a legal principle that became literal in Shanghai's International Settlement, where its British, American, and French inhabitants constructed a miniature town that looked like home.¹² It is unsurprising that the later Europeans arriving at the Bund found its aesthetic so pleasant—they made enormous efforts to shape Puxi in their own image.

While Westerners trumpeted the Bund as successful colonial intervention— "the muddy towpath of fifty years ago which has magically become one of the most striking and civic entrances in the world,"¹³ Chinese people living in "the greatest city of all the Orient"¹⁴ witnessed a less miraculous reality.

The 1933 silent film *Daybreak* (天明), directed by Sun Yu, begins with a young woman and her husband moving to Shanghai from a small village. Introduced to the city nightlife, Lingling¹⁵ initially marvels at the bright lights of the Bund before seeing a group of Chinese prostitutes. Later on, Lingling's cousin meets with the silk factory boss—a powerful Shanghai warlord who has repeatedly raped her. After pleading with him to not assault her cousin, saying she would rather be fired, the factory boss replies that starvation...is the worst way to die! It is a slow, slow death!" In the next scene, he drugs and rapes Lingling in a gaudy hotel suite.¹⁶

¹¹ Koren, "Shanghai," 259.

¹² Daniel Brook, "Once upon a Time in Shanghai: Is History Repeating Itself in China's Glittering Global City?," *Foreign Policy*, October 2012, 75.

¹³ *All About Shanghai and Environs: A Standard Guide Book*, 51.

¹⁴ California Directory Association, *Tourist Guide to Shanghai*, 11.

¹⁵ Translated in the English subtitles as Caltrop.

¹⁶ Sun Yun, *Tianming* 天明 (*Daybreak*), Chinese Silent Film (United Photoplay Services (Lianhua), 1933), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cE4ZBIHNL3E&list=PLhA05Qf-09xBaz_t_ynYbyZ-Porcj7bui&index=3&t=38s.

Foreigners fetishized this sexual violence and poverty in the packaging of “Shanghai the bizarre, cinematographic presentation of humanity, its vices and virtues,”¹⁷ feeding seductive narratives of metropolitan sin and thrill. In David Koren’s biography of the city, he argues that from the perspective of the fetishized, Shanghai was not an oasis but “mostly a disgrace, forced submission to the immoral west, the ‘whore of Asia.’”¹⁸ Shanghai, as a symbol of modernity, was contingent on being a playground for the West.

At the end of the 30s, this period of Shanghai was coming to a close. Japanese invasion spread to the eastern coast, then full civil war broke out between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. Arriving at the Huangpu river, the Red Army transformed Westminster chimes of the “Big Ching” into a Maoist folk anthem, “The East is Red.”¹⁹ Amid revolution, the glittering music and fashion of the Bund faded into oblivion.²⁰

Half a century later, the 1990s ushered in quite another vision of Shanghai.

Under the emblem of Deng Xiaoping’s proclaimed return to normalcy, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) shifted its gaze to Puxi. Plans for preservation launched in 1984 with the Bureau of Urban Planning defining portions of the Bund for protection and classifying seventeen of its buildings as historical landmarks.²¹

Simultaneous to the revival of “Old Shanghai” was the construction of its future. Standing in front of a miniature model, three men in suits considered plans for a new town along the Huangpu river.²²

¹⁷ *All About Shanghai and Environs: A Standard Guide Book*, 51.

¹⁸ Koren, “Shanghai,” 278.

¹⁹ Wasserstrom, “A Big Ben with Chinese Characteristics,” 68.

²⁰ Christian Henriot, “The Shanghai Bund in Myth and History: An Essay through Textual and Visual Sources,” *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 4, no. 1 (May 26, 2010): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535651003779400>, 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²² Stuart Franklin, *CHINA, Shanghai. Visitors View a Model for Development in the Pudong New Area of Shanghai, 1993*, 1993, Photograph, Magnum Photos, https://library-artstor-org.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/#/asset/AMAGNUMIG_10311500214.

This time, it was not French, American, or British inhabitants, but Chinese urban planners tasked with building a “New Shanghai.” The government hoped that the carefully scripted development of Pudong would center Shanghai as China’s contemporary metropolis, not just the “rebirth of a colonial city.”²³ This was of utmost importance for Chinese leaders in legitimizing its position as a rising superpower.



Three Chinese men discuss a model of Pudong New Development, which features the newly constructed Oriental Pearl TV Tower. Captured in Shanghai, 1993. (Magnum Photos/Stuart Franklin).

As Pudong progressed into a free trade district for high-technology, finance, and trading industries,²⁴ Puxi and the era it symbolized returned to prominence through processes of commercialization and nostalgia. In search of an identity freed from the trauma of colonial trespass and Mao’s Cultural Revolution, Shanghai began to embrace and rewrite its own past. Old calendars, advertisements, and cigarette boxes of the 1930s were reprinted and sold as classics.²⁵ Shanghai could profit from its complicated history, and in turn the

²³ Koren, “Shanghai,” 276-277.

²⁴ Julie Lee, “The Role of Landscape Architects in China,” *Landscape Australia* 16, no. 2 (1994): 133–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/45144898>, 125.

²⁵ Xudong Zhang, “Shanghai Nostalgia: Postrevolutionary Allegories in Wang Anyi’s Literary Production in the 1990s,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* no. 2 (September 1, 2000): 349–87, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-8-2-349>, 355.

recommodification of those saturated images made the city's former humiliation more palatable.

This wave of nostalgia also led to the return of elegant, qipao-gowned women in popular media, notably present in the films of Wong Kar Wei. In Gina Marchetti's analysis, the Shanghai women written by Wong Kar Wei represent the historical tension of the city, an economic stronghold ravaged by Western imperialism—despite being absent, the memory of Shanghai and its colors, smells, and sounds permeates his films.²⁶ Late 20th century commemoration of Shanghai's "sensuous glamour" as an artifice of time became part of the depoliticization of colonialism and imperialism, integrated into Shanghai's development as a capitalist, postmodern icon.²⁷

Accompanying the explicit cultural reclamation of the 1990s, Shanghai also started to challenge the Bund's origin story as a product of Western innovation. In a 2006 documentary produced by the China Intercontinental Communication Center, interviewees argue that even though European settlers proposed their designs for the Bund, it was the gifted Chinese contractors and laborers who built them; the Bund is their legacy. Remarking upon the role of native Shanghai residents in the 1920s, the documentary's narrator states that "they were never simply onlookers of development."²⁸ Accentuating the nature of Puxi's construction is one way for Shanghai to present the Bund as an extension of itself, rather than the outcome of extraterritoriality.

Considering its legacy, Christian Henriot writes that the Bund became heritage in a "quasi UNESCO fashion," stripped of any historical substance but instrumental for Shanghai's journey towards a contemporary identity on the global stage.²⁹ Henriot's

²⁶ Gina Marchetti, "Wong's Ladies from Shanghai," in *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 205–31, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118425589.ch8>, 210.

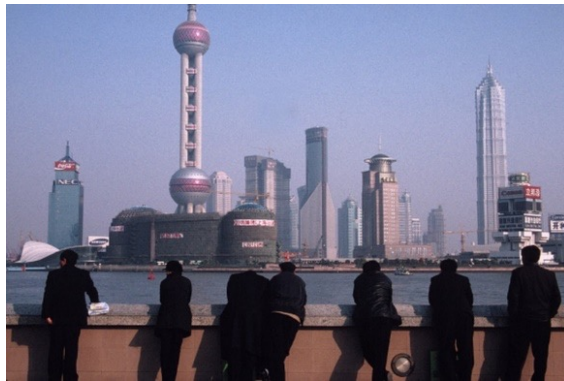
²⁷ Zhang, "Shanghai Nostalgia," 353–354.

²⁸ Li Mian and Chen Qin, *Shanghai Waitan 上海外滩 (The Bund in Shanghai)*, Documentary (China Intercontinental Communication Center, 2006), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHPgKRDM0Fw&feature=youtu.be>.

²⁹ Henriot, "The Shanghai Bund in Myth and History," 25.

characterization of the Bund resembling a World Heritage Site is apt—Puxi has always had “outstanding universal value” in the imagination of Westerners, and more for those outside of China than within.

At the turn of the new millennium, Shanghai contemplated what its future identity could be. At the Bund’s promenade, residents looked out over the newly minted Pudong, now home to some of the tallest buildings in the world. White banners with bold Chinese characters covered buildings still under construction. A Coca-Cola billboard stood at the tip of a glass skyscraper, in the distance, a Samsung advertisement.³⁰



Seven people stand at the edge of the Bund waterfront, looking towards the Pudong bank. Advertisements are visible on some completed buildings, while other structures remain under construction. Captured on the Huangpu River, Shanghai, 1999. (Magnum Photos/Harry Gruyaert).

“The old gateway to China has rolled out its red carpet once again.”³¹

³⁰ Harry Gruyaert, *CHINA, Town of Shanghai. 1999. CHINA. Shanghai" View from the Bund of the New Pundong Area with the Pearl Television Tower, 1999*, Photograph, Magnum Photos, https://library-artstor-org.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/asset/AMAGNUMIG_10311546560.

³¹ Koren, “Shanghai,” 254.

Returning to the Bund, it is now nighttime. Puxi's buildings are illuminated to passing visitors;³² Shanghai took elaborate efforts to light the base of the waterfront. People standing on both sides of the river take photos of the spectacular view. The LED strobes start flashing, and a child pulls away to cover her eyes—it is too bright.

Shanghai's struggle for political and cultural modernity is visible here. Pudong is not a particularly cohesive skyline compared with other metropolises, but it is impossible to ignore. In one European architect's opinion, Pudong is not meant to be stylish; its goal is to stand out, or as an American critic crudely put it, to lift a "middle finger to the West."³³

A more nuanced interpretation of Pudong is that it attempts to redefine Shanghai in China's terms. That project is working—the Renaissance, Neoclassical, and Art Deco buildings of the Bund look tiny in opposition. On the travel blog *Tripsavvy*, Sarah Naumann comments that while "Puxi is somewhat of a blast of Shanghai's past, Pudong is a glimpse into its future."³⁴ This relegation of the Bund to historic relic, when it had been the symbol of urban modernity and cosmopolitanism less than a century ago, reveals the fluidity of time in collective memory. Facing each other, Puxi and Pudong mold perceptions of old and new.

Far more people are ambling along the Bund than earlier in the day. There is a traffic jam when a large crowd forms around a group of young people readying their bionic boots. The one in the center leaps forward, propelling high above the pavement. He lands. The crowd keeps moving.

³² NBBJ. *The Bund; Long View of the Bund at Night with the Monument to the People's Heroes in the Foreground*. October 1, 2010. Photograph. Contemporary Architecture, Urban Design and Public Art (ART on FILE Collection). https://library-artstor-org.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/#!/asset/ARTONFILE_DB_10313254103.

³³ Brook, "Once upon a Time in Shanghai," 76.

³⁴ Sara Naumann, "Choosing Between Shanghai's Puxi and Pudong Neighborhoods," Travel guides, *Tripsavvy* (blog), February 24, 2020, <https://www.tripsavvy.com/two-sides-of-shanghai-pudong-puxi-1495288>.



At night, the Bund's buildings are brightly lit. On the left side are the historical structures of the Bund, to the right are people walking along the waterfront. Captured on the Huangpu River, Shanghai, October 1st, 2010. (Photo/NBBJ).

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