

# Writing the *longtang* way of life



‘Looked down upon from the highest point in the city, Shanghai’s *longtang* – her vast neighborhoods inside enclosed alleys – are a magnificent sight.’ Thus opens the award-winning novel *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* by the influential writer Wang Anyi. In this novel, Shanghai’s alleyway houses are brought to life by meticulous descriptions that seem to anthropomorphise the city. A unique housing typology, the experience of its residents and Shanghai history, all made one through the literary imagination.

Lena Scheen

EVERY SHANGHAISE WILL PROUDLY TELL YOU that if you haven’t been to the Bund, you haven’t been to Shanghai. It is indeed a unique site: imposing buildings from the treaty-port period (1841-1943) facing the futuristic skyline of ultramodern Pudong across the Huangpu River. The local significance of the Bund reveals the citizens’ paradoxical rejoicing in Shanghai’s new global image and, simultaneously, their growing sense of nostalgia for the city’s past. In particular the first half of the 20th century has become a favourite subject in ‘high’ as well as popular culture; a time when the cosmopolitan metropolis was world-famous as a financial and cultural centre, known by such colourful nicknames as ‘Pearl of the Orient’, ‘Whore of Asia’, ‘Paris of the East’, or ‘Paradise for Adventurers’.

The collective infatuation with colonial Shanghai – referred to as ‘Shanghai nostalgia’ in Chinese cultural discourse – sprang up in the mid-1990s when the city witnessed an explosion of destruction and renewal. Searching for a Shanghai identity in the midst of brutal transformation, Shanghai writers resorted, en masse, to this distinctive period in Chinese history. After being presented as the epitome of evil in the Maoist period, colonial Shanghai now reconquered its original representation of Western-style urban modernity. The typical Shanghai *longtang* – built in the colonial period and characterised by a unique mixture of Chinese and Western architecture –

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has become one of the main symbols, featuring recurrently in contemporary Shanghai fiction, of which *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is one of the most representative examples.

### Song of Everlasting Sorrow

Wang Anyi’s novel borrows its title from a narrative poem by Bai Juyi (CE 772-846) about the tragic love story between Tang emperor Xuanzong and his most beautiful concubine Yang Guifei. Being madly in love, the emperor neglects his state affairs until he has to flee because of an armed rebellion. His royal guards blame Yang Guifei and force the emperor to have her executed. The poem closes with Xuanzong’s lamenting words: ‘While even heaven and earth will one day come to an end, this everlasting sorrow shall endure.’

The novel *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* also ends in the murder of a tragic beauty, the ageing Qiyao whose life reflects Shanghai’s turbulent history. As though she is just one of the diverse elements that constitute a *longtang* neighbourhood, Wang Anyi only introduces Qiyao after four chapters of detailed description of the *longtang* setting. She embodies the ‘girlish *longtang* spirit’:

*Behind every doorway in the Shanghai longtang a Wang Qiyao is studying, embroidering, whispering secrets to her sisters, or throwing a teary-eyed tantrum at her parents.*

Through Wang Anyi’s words, the protagonist of the novel seems to become the *longtang* itself, or, in the words of the Chinese journal *Writer*: ‘the city’s alleys, the city’s atmosphere, the city’s thought and spirit.’

While the timeframe of the three parts of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* corresponds to the political periods of pre-Mao, Mao, and post-Mao China, it is not a historical novel in the strict sense. History and politics play their part behind the scenes, leaving their traces in Wang Qiyao’s life story. But what is most striking about the novel is how historical events are mirrored in the changing physical appearance of the *longtang*, that originated in the glorious days of cosmopolitan Shanghai:

*First to appear are the dormer windows protruding from a rooftop tingzjian [the garret above the kitchen in longtang, this often rented out to struggling young writers and lent its name to a popular literary genre as a result] of those traditional longtang buildings, showing themselves off with a certain self-conscious delicacy; the wooden shutters are carefully delineated, the handmade rooftop tiles are arranged with precision, even the potted roses on the windowsills have been cared for painstakingly.*

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## 'My relations with Shanghai are tense'

An interview with Wang Anyi

When Wang Anyi was only one year old, she moved to Shanghai with her mother, the novelist Ru Zhijuan. Today, Wang Anyi herself is, arguably, the most influential writer of Shanghai and her stories consistently use the city as a backdrop. Yet in a recent public interview, Wang Anyi confessed that she 'doesn't feel Shanghaiese', though she added, 'but, neither can I say that I'm not Shanghaiese, because if I'm not, then where am I from?'

Ms Wang sits on the stage, wearing an ankle-length skirt and a long shawl draped around her shoulders. Her lively eyes scan the audience with curiosity. Sitting up straight, hair pinned back, feet placed firmly on the ground, hands clenched into fists on her knees, she exudes the air both of a distinguished writer and of a down-to-earth peasant woman; an intriguing paradox that she shares with several other mainland Chinese intellectuals.

It is not difficult to picture Ms Wang 40 years ago, when most 'urban youths' were sent to the countryside for 're-education by the peasants'; a young girl with rosy cheeks and braided hair, most likely wearing unisex cotton-padded clothes while singing revolutionary songs to the rising sun and chairman Mao. In particular, her early works deal with these experiences during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), after which she started writing stories that belonged to the so-called 'roots-seeking literature': rural fiction that explored traditional Chinese customs and values still present in the countryside. However, since the 1990s her work has turned increasingly towards the main subject of this interview: the city of Shanghai. Explaining this shift in her work, Wang says:

*Although my work from before the 1990s does not limit itself to the countryside, the city did indeed play a vague role; it was always in the background of the plot. At that time, my work focused on the characters, their emotions, and how they grow in the story. Shanghai is the place where I live and I think people are usually not so conscious of their own living environment. So that's probably also the reason that when I wrote stories set in Shanghai, I didn't really reflect on the place where the characters were living. Since the 1990s, though my work still focused on both rural and urban experiences, the city became more concrete, and sometimes even the main character of a story. For example, in my short story 'The Street', the street itself is actually the only character and forms the whole plot; I describe the houses, the cars, the people, but the people remain nameless. Although I am very critical of this story—I think it is rather boring—I still consider it an important turning point in my writing: from now on Shanghai became an important subject in my work.*

After each question, Wang Anyi vigorously keeps on talking until the interviewer interrupts her for the next. She is open, quick-witted, and sharp, at times appearing to think out loud and she never loses her sense of humour. Holding the audience spellbound, Ms Wang recounts her childhood search for belonging in a society that disparagingly labelled her as 'new Shanghaiese':

*When my mother and I arrived in Shanghai, we moved into an apartment with a local Shanghai family living above us. They criticised our family for many things: our home was too sparsely furnished, we lived too simply and we couldn't speak Shanghaiese. They were constantly lecturing us and passing judgment. So when I befriended the daughter of this family, my mother was furious and kept nagging about how this family would turn me into an ordinary person. My mother moved in both literary and military circles, so her values were in conflict with those of the local Shanghaiese. What I'm trying to explain is that there is a difference between the 'local' and the 'new' Shanghaiese. Although there is something quite funny about it: even though my mother had a strong aversion to the locals' criticisms, she actually admired them as well. I think my mother and I were both intrigued by our neighbours' lifestyle. They would visit places that were particularly popular with local Shanghaiese, like the Chenghuang Temple and the Great World Entertainment Centre. Our way of life was completely different and going to the cinema was the only fun thing I did with my mother. So from a very young age I have always felt I don't fit in with the local Shanghai lifestyle.*

Wang Anyi's childhood experiences not only marked her life but also planted the seeds of her ambivalent relationship with Shanghai:

*Although I'm living in this city, we don't blend like milk and water. Sometimes I feel like I'm a spectator watching the city from a distance. Maybe it's precisely because of this feeling that I can have an objective view of Shanghai. Although this objectivity is relative, of course, since it's overruled by my own experiences: I have been living here since I was one year old,*

*my friends and classmates were all Shanghaiese, and our family has moved around town. I guess I have a very tense relation with this city: I feel distant and close to it at the same time. I don't like the city, but I have no choice but to like it. My relationship with Shanghai is probably best expressed by the Chinese idiom 'the bones are broken, but the muscles still hold them together'.*

The most important obstacle between Wang Anyi and the city appears to be the local language. Several times, Ms Wang brings up the consequences of her ongoing struggle to master Shanghaiese (a northern Wu dialect that is less than 50 per cent intelligible for speakers of Mandarin, the national standard language):

*Since I couldn't speak Shanghaiese as a child, I was always very nervous when I had to say something in public and afraid people wouldn't have the patience to listen to me. So in the end, I would usually just give up the right to speak and, in order to compensate for that, mainly talk to myself. For me, writing is just like talking to myself: the process of writing begins when I feel like I'm talking too much to myself, then I just have to write it down until it becomes a novel.*

The story reveals how Wang Anyi continuously relates her position as a 'new Shanghaiese' to her writing profession, reminding us of the best-selling author Chen Danyan (often grouped with Wang Anyi and Cheng Naishan for their 'nostalgic novels' on Shanghai), who also moved to the city as a young child and frequently emphasises how her 'outsider's perspective,' as she puts it in an interview, 'helped her to detect many subtle things ignored and taken for granted by local Shanghaiese'. It is precisely this distance that turns them into good observers, as Ms Wang modestly explains:

*I haven't experienced much, so most of my stories come from my imagination. Actually, you can call me a little boring or a coward with regard to life, but I do have passions and I like to watch other people's lives. I'm not a reader but a spectator, observing the lives of others and even the most trivial things. When young people aspiring to become a writer ask for advice, I always tell them that the main talent of a writer is to observe.*

A talent that Wang Anyi attributes particularly to women: not only because they 'have a great capacity for strong emotions' as 'emotional beings', but also, again, because of their 'outsider's position':

*Male authors mainly write about major events in society. Even when they write about personal feelings, it is always related to those issues. Works by female authors have their own characteristics: we prefer to write about daily life. Why do people like Zhang Ailing [Eileen Chang] so much? I think it's because she writes about the common people. This is why I personally prefer to read works by female authors. Even in the most boring stories you can still take pleasure in their great ability for description; they portray details that only women notice. Maybe it's even because society has been male-dominated for such a long time, and we women have been kept outside, that we have had the opportunity for self-searching.*

As soon as the gender issue comes up, Ms Wang's eyes light up and her voice becomes excited. While passionately

championing women's writing, Wang Anyi is also very critical. Straightening her back, she ventures:

*If we talk about women's rights today, I believe we have accomplished a lot. However, I do feel that when we look at it from the perspective of the emotions, we are still quite primitive: it's like we women are not fully evolved, as if we're still dragging a tail, a tail of emotions. When a woman is the protagonist of a story, she is mostly completely independent, she has everything, she can do anything, and yet she is still yearning for love, searching for true love. So actually, not much has changed in this perspective. We are still living in the age of Jane Austen, we're still not so developed and still predominantly looking for a good marriage.*

The evening ends with a question from the audience about Wang Anyi's most influential novel, *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, a story that follows the adventures of a Shanghai woman from when she participated in a Miss Shanghai contest in the 1940s until her tragic death in the 1980s. The English translation carries the subtitle 'A Novel of Shanghai', revealing that it is actually the history of Shanghai that is being portrayed through the life story of the protagonist, a woman of course:

*I don't dare to say that the protagonist Wang Qiyao represents the city, because if I would say that, readers might point out qualities that are missing. But I did try to keep many characteristics of the protagonist resonant with the city. For example, Wang Qiyao is from a common background, born in a common family, which is just like Shanghai. In China, Shanghai is a relatively mature society consisting of an urban middle class that barely inherited anything from the past, but had to start from scratch, on its own and without being too ambitious. So the city and its people take it one step at a time. What I like about Wang Qiyao, and what is also true for the city, is that although she is very pretty and tender, she is a strong woman at heart. She doesn't care about her duties according to the social norms, but pursues things despised by contemporary values, which is why she is always defeated. But of course, Shanghai is a much stronger woman and it is developing into a megacity. So, if I can't say Wang Qiyao is a representative of Shanghai, then she is like Boston ivy on the wall of an old Shanghai building: a beautiful decoration of the city.*

Lena Scheen

### Note

Wang Anyi (b.1954) is the author of numerous volumes of essays, short stories, and novels, which are gaining her increasing recognition around the world, ranging from China's highest literary honour, the Mao Dun Prize (for *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*), to the Los Angeles Times Book of the Year Award (for which *Baotown* was a finalist). Currently Ms Wang is the Chairperson of the Shanghai Writers' Association, and a professor of Chinese literature at Fudan University.

This interview took place during 'Shanghai Week', a festival organised by the city of Rotterdam in honour of the 30th anniversary of the Shanghai-Rotterdam sister city relationship and the Shanghai World Expo 2010. If you are interested in the full interview, please contact the author. With thanks to Nan Su (Dutch Sino Business Promotions) for her kind help with the translation.



From left to right: Nan Su, Wang Anyi, Lena Scheen, Jana Beranova (Rotterdam poet). The picture above the podium shows the Shanghai lane houses. Photo: Eric Chen.



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This is the décor against which Wang Qiyao's story begins in 1946, when she is 16 years old, reaching third place in a Miss Shanghai contest. Leading a glamorous life as a model and mistress of Kuomintang officer Li, Qiyao is able to escape her humble background. Her charmed life ends with Li getting killed in a plane crash and Qiyao being left with only a small box of his gold bars.

The second part of the novel, set in the Mao period (1949-1976), finds Qiyao making ends meet as the neighbourhood nurse. *Longtang* life runs its normal course, seemingly untouched by the political upheaval surrounding it: neighbours and friends meet in Qiyao's home, eating, drinking, chatting, gossiping, playing mahjong, and having afternoon tea. Since this kind of 'decadent bourgeois' life was basically impossible during the Mao period, one could almost forget this part of the novel is no longer set in colonial Shanghai. In this way, the *longtang* can be seen as a place of refuge and a space of apolitical resistance.

All this abruptly ends in 1966, when Qiyao's then lover commits suicide by throwing himself out of a window. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) is largely omitted, which is rather striking for a work that deals with 40 years of Shanghai history—Shanghai is the city where the Cultural Revolution was instigated and experienced its peak. People were restricted in their private lives and many residents were sent to the countryside. It is again through the depiction of the *longtang* that one can painfully sense the atmosphere of overall devastation:

*Longtang alleys of all shapes and sizes ran all over the city, and it was during the summer of 1966 that the red- and black-tiled rooftops riddled with protruding dormer windows and concrete terraces were all pried open suddenly, their secrets, conciliatory or compromising, damp and moldy, reeking of rat piss, were in the process of rotting away [...]*

In the final part of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* Shanghai embraces the market economy model. Wang Qiyao has more difficulties in adapting than her illegitimate daughter. As a former Miss Shanghai, Qiyao becomes a symbol of the colonial period and attracts a young boy who idolises her because of this. However, he soon realises that his beloved old city and Qiyao are both fading irrevocably away.

The novel ends with Wang Qiyao's violent death: she is murdered for the one possession that she nostalgically used to keep the past alive—Li's gold bars, symbols of old Shanghai.

*The Shanghai longtang have grown gray; there are cracks in the streets and along the walls, the alley lamps have been smashed by mischievous children, the gutters are clogged, and foul water trickles down the streets. Even the leaves of the sweet-scented oleanders are coated with grime.*

By depicting the daily lives and 'trivial' experiences of ordinary people in the cramped spaces of *longtang* neighborhoods, Wang Anyi reveals the untold stories of the city, or what Zhang Xudong calls 'the natural history'—unofficial histories, intimate life-worlds, and memories—of the city beneath 'a mechanical, homogeneous history.' The *longtang* seem to embody the soul or essence of Shanghai culture that has survived in spite of a brutal history, but is now about to vanish:

*Amid the forest of new skyscrapers, these old longtang neighborhoods are like a fleet of sunken ships, their battled hulls exposed as the sea dries up.*

What the narrator mourns, seeing the decay of Shanghai's *longtang*, is not so much its unique architecture but the Shanghai lifestyle that the typology of these houses made possible. In an interview, Wang Anyi illustrated this poignantly with the following personal story:

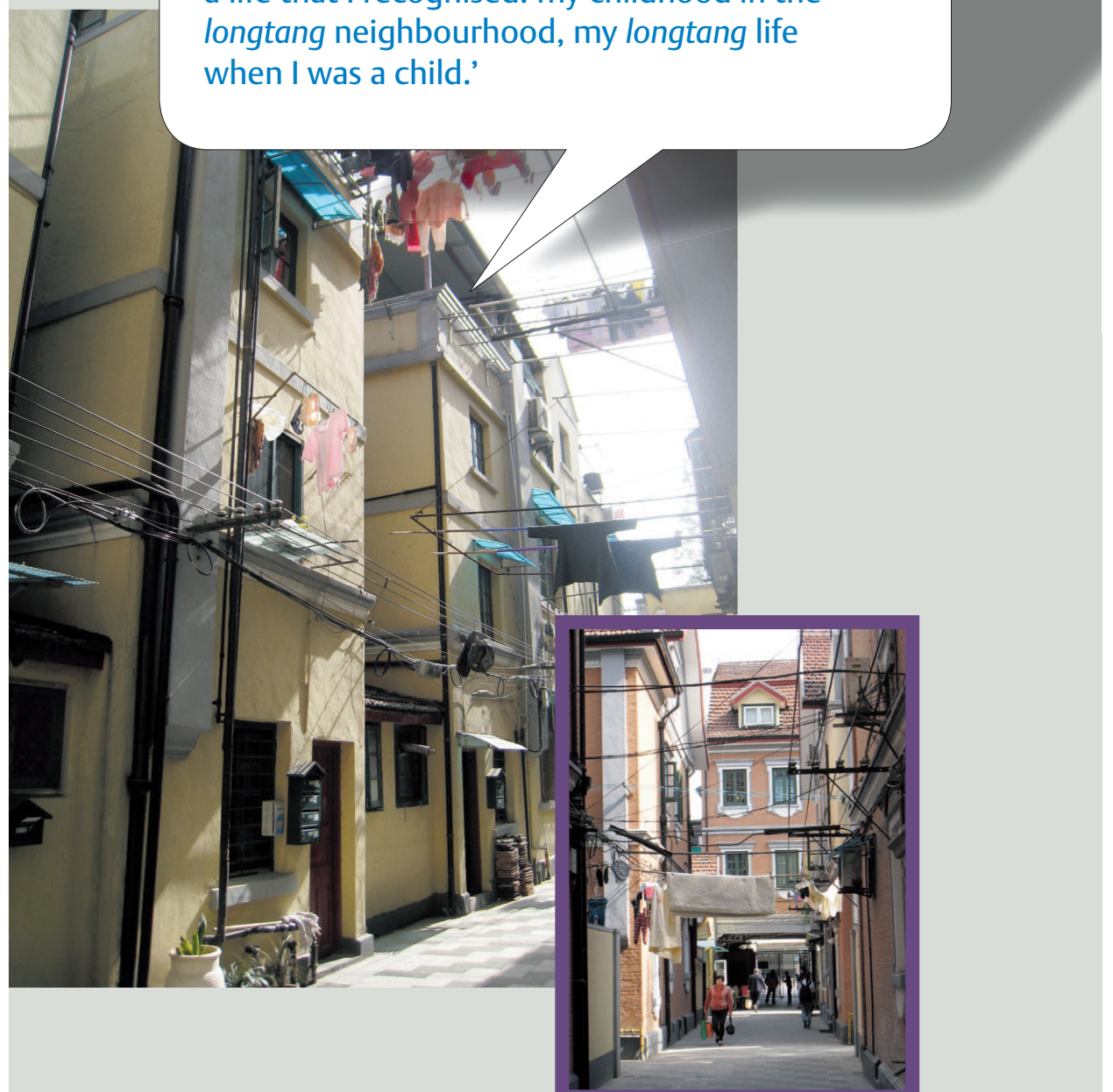
*One day I was heading for an appointment, but couldn't find the place. I suddenly noticed that I had unconsciously entered a typical Shanghai longtang neighbourhood. As I walked on, a deeply familiar feeling overwhelmed me. It was a particular smell, but also a particular sound, a particular temperature... Tears came to my eyes, because these sensations embodied a life that I recognised: my childhood in the longtang neighbourhood, my longtang life when I was a child.*

To conclude in Wang Anyi's own words, 'You could say a *longtang* is a certain type of architecture, but what it actually is, is a way of life.'

Lena Scheen  
Leiden University, The Netherlands  
lena.scheen@gmail.com

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