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Property-driven Urban Change in Post-Socialist Shanghai: Reading the Television Series *Woju*

Samuel Y. LIANG

Abstract: In late 2009, the television series *Woju* (蜗居) received extremely high audience ratings in major Chinese cities. Its visual narratives engage the public and comment on social developments by presenting detailed pictures of urban change in Shanghai and the everyday lives of a range of urban characters who are involved in and affected by the urban-restructuring process and represent three distinct social groups: “white-collar” immigrants, low-income local residents, and powerful officials. By analysing the visual narratives of these characters, this article highlights the loss of the city’s historical identity and shows how the reorganization of urban space translates into a reallocation of resources, power and prestige among the social groups. The article also shows that *Woju* represents a new development in literary and television production in the age of the Internet and globalization; its imaginative construct of the city was based on transnational and virtual rather than local and neighbourhood experience. This also testifies to the loss of the city’s established identity in cultural production.

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Keywords: China, *fangnu* (property slaves), mistress, corruption, real-estate market, social inequality

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Introduction

In late 2009, the television series *Woju* (*Dwelling Like Snails*, also known as *Dwelling Narrowness*) received extremely high audience ratings when it was aired in Shanghai and other Chinese cities.¹ The series is adapted and expanded from the eponymous novel written by Singapore-based author Liuliu (2007). While the novel is explicitly set in Shanghai, its television adaptation changes the city name from Shanghai to a fictional Jiangzhou. However, street views and buildings shown in the series are easily recognizable as Shanghai. While remaining faithful to the novel's original plotlines, the series' visual narratives more powerfully engage the public and capture social developments by presenting detailed pictures of Shanghai's changing urban spaces and everyday lives.

Just as the series was beginning to stimulate broad discussions about related social issues among its viewers, a Beijing television station cancelled its scheduled airing of the series after just a few episodes. Rumours then circulated that the broadcasting authority banned *Woju* because of its "negative influences". Though authorities never confirmed this ban, the series was never aired again on television after 2009. This stimulated stronger interest in the series among the public, who then viewed its Internet version, which consisted of 35 uncensored episodes, in contrast to the 33-episode version aired on television. *Woju* is indeed a controversial television series, as its implied challenge of the established moral values and its explicit references to sex and corruption shocked viewers, who were used to seeing positive portrayals of contemporary life or innocuous historical romances on the television screen (Figure 1). *Woju* has been widely discussed and debated in the media and Internet forums. An up-to-date, comprehensive collection of media reports, commentaries and blogs about the series (e.g. Dyer 2010; Jia 2010; Xu 2010; Zhou Zhaocheng 2009) is now available on the author's official website (Liuliu 2010).

Unlike earlier Chinese television sensations, such as *Kewang* (渴望, *Yearnings*) in the 1990s (see Rofel 1994), *Woju* reached a new generation of viewers via the Internet. They mainly consist of college graduates born after 1980, hence they are called the 80 *hou* (后, post-1980) generation; their struggle to earn a place in cities like Shanghai is reflected in the experiences of the series' protagonists – their hopes, hard work, frustra-

1 All translations from Chinese sources are my own.

tions and protests in the rapidly changing city. These characters represent a new Shanghai, one which has become distinct from the old Shanghai of the colonial and socialist periods.

Figure 1: A Poster for the Television Series *Woju*



Source: Tengxun 2009.

The city's rapid pace of (re-)modernization has drastically altered its image and identity: The Shanghai dialect is heard less often in the old urban core (within the inner ring road) than Mandarin and English; swaths of old neighbourhoods, known as *longtang* (弄堂) or *shikumen* (石库门), are being razed while upon their ruins upscale properties are being built; clusters of new skyscrapers transform the city into a “concrete jungle” (石屎森林, *shishi senlin*) similar to Hong Kong or Singapore, whose earlier modernization experiences seem to be replicated in Shanghai.

Woju captures this social and spatial change by depicting the everyday lives of a range of urban characters who are involved in and affected by the urban-restructuring process. These fictional characters represent three distinct social groups (群体, *qunti*) or classes: hardworking, young “white collars” (usually immigrants from hinterland areas); ageing, low-

income, local residents (who have relocated from their old neighbourhoods); and powerful officials (along with their mistresses and friends in the private sector). By recounting and analysing the stories of the key characters in *Woju*, this article highlights the emerging urban identity of Shanghai and shows how the reorganization of urban space translates into a reallocation of resources, power and prestige among the social groups.

My reading of *Woju* as a social text is based on the assumption that its making was a cultural inflection of real social developments and formed a part of their continued discourses in the media. I will first discuss the making of *Woju* in relation to the social developments and then analyse – in three sections, each focusing on one group of characters – the visual narratives that are interwoven with, and are in dialogue with, current social change.

Urban Change and the Making of *Woju*

Liuliu was born in Anhui Province and graduated from Anhui University with an associate's degree (大专, *dazhuan*) in 1995. Four years later, she moved to Singapore, where her husband was studying for a doctoral degree. She has since then lived in the city, and she started her literary career by publishing her works online. Her first two online novels, *Wang Gui yu An Na* (王贵与安娜, *Wang Gui and An Na*, 2004) and *Shuangmian-jiao* (双面胶, *Two-side Glue Tap*, 2005) – the latter set in Shanghai – were highly successful and subsequently published in print (Liuliu 2004, 2005); they were also adapted into two popular television series directed by Teng Huatao. Teng is a Shanghai native and *Woju* is his third collaborative work with Liuliu.

Liuliu has long-time connections in Shanghai; she says that she now divides her time between Singapore and Shanghai and lives in a small apartment in Shanghai for a few months each year (Xu 2010). She nonetheless incorporates into *Woju* her own experience as a new immigrant who struggled to get a job and maintain a home in Singapore. Such experiences are no longer specific to a locality; they can be replicated in another “global city”, as Liuliu reflects:

I think *Woju* is probably not just a story about Shanghai. It might be about New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, or any other prosperous international metropolis. It represents hope, struggle, wealth, and success. Singapore does not have the kind of ups and downs

found in the plot of *Woju*, but the uneasy feeling about the steadily rising property prices is quite similar. This year I lament in Singapore: The money I earn does not catch up with the rising prices (quoted in Zhou Zhaocheng 2009).

Thus, Liuliu's own transnational experience is written into *Woju* as a narrative about the global property-market trend, which has transformed socialist Shanghai into an international metropolis similar to other global cities. The city's rapid economic growth strongly resembles the earlier rises of Hong Kong and Singapore, and is primarily driven by real-estate developments that follow the Hong Kong model of land leases and property developments. In fact, Shanghai is now a "property state" similar to those two Chinese-speaking, post-colonial cities (see Haila 2000).

The success of *Woju* lies precisely in capturing the ethos of this social and spatial change and in exposing the sensitive issues of high property prices, official corruption and social inequalities that emerged during the real-estate boom. As a visual narrative of urban change, the series itself also becomes part of the change: It becomes interwoven with social developments by recreating social developments as evolving narratives. I shall briefly recount these social developments in the rest of this section.

As the real-estate boom has drawn domestic and overseas capital into the major cities, property prices have been rising sharply since 2004. This development makes it increasingly difficult for new immigrants – mostly young college graduates from other provinces – to purchase their first home in great cities like Shanghai. They usually rely on their parents' financial support and money borrowed from friends to make their first payment (normally 30 per cent of the property price) and then spend a great portion of their monthly income on mortgage repayments. Their awkward financial and living conditions have earned them an ungracious title: *fangnu* (房奴) – "property slaves". Stories about them are widely reported in the news media (see Tang 2006; Ke 2006; Lei 2006) and are reproduced in fiction and television dramas. A novel titled *Fangnu* depicts the struggles of young college graduates in renting and buying homes in a city in north China away from their hometowns (Wei 2008). Unrelated to the novel, a television series with the same title (which was soon changed to *Fangxi* or Houses, as the authorities considered *Fangnu* to have negative connotations) dramatizes the property-related sorrows of urban residents of different age groups – those born in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Zhang Xiaoguang 2009; Liu Jie 2009). In comparison, *Woju* is by far the most influential cultural reproduction of the *fangnu*.

The real-estate market also breeds corruption and social inequalities: While the high property prices bring immense financial burdens to urban residents, the developers and local officials reap huge profits from the urban-rebuilding process. Since the land-lease system was introduced in 1988, the local government has engaged in rent-seeking activities by selling (the use-right of) urban land to the private sector, which serves as a collaborator in the former's urban-rebuilding programme (see Wu, Xu, and Yeh 2007). Old neighbourhoods in city-centre areas are rebuilt into upscale properties for the transnational elite, and the original working-class residents are relocated into remote suburbs; an extremely influential example of this urban renewal was Xintiandi and its surrounding properties, which were developed by the Shui On Group, a Hong Kong-based company (see Yang and Chang 2007; Liang 2008). The news media frequently report disputes between developers and local residents over relocation compensations; such disputes sometimes develop into violent confrontations in the "forced relocations" (强制拆迁, *qiangzhi chaiqian*) of the residents by the developers or local government (see CCTV 2009).

In 2006 a high-profile investigation of the illegal appropriation of social security funds (社保基金, *shebao jijin*) for real-estate speculations caused the fall of Chen Liangyu, the secretary of the Shanghai Committee of the Communist Party. High-ranking officials directly involved in the case included Chen's long-time secretary Qin Yu, then the governor of Baoshan District, Shanghai. It was reported that *Woju*'s main characters (Song Siming and Guo Haizao) are based on Qin Yu and his mistress (Zhou Yuwu 2009). *Woju* also refers to other news events in the city; for example, its story of a local resident killed in a demolition (see the section on Granma Li below) reminds viewers of a real incident in 2006 in which employees of a relocation company set fire to a building near Urumqi Road and killed a couple of residents who refused to be relocated. By remaking these events into the visual drama of a range of urban characters, including new immigrants, old residents, officials and developers, *Woju* stimulates discussions about related social issues. It gives insights into the urban-structuring process and draws viewers' attention to the issues of social inequalities and injustices arising from the process.

Remaking real events into fiction is not new in Chinese literature and visual culture, but sourcing them on the Internet is. Liuliu's work signals a new development in literary and television production in the age of the Internet and globalization. As she revealed in an interview

with local press in Singapore after the success of *Woju*, the Internet has changed her lifestyle: Aside from running a few errands, she spent all her indoor time surfing the Web; this allowed her to capture the pulse of change in Chinese society while living in Singapore (Xu 2010; Zhou Zhaocheng 2009). The novel consists of, it seems to me, anecdotes and rumours about sensational news events circulated on the Internet rather than being based on the author's own real-life experiences. The earlier generations of Shanghai-based writers, such as Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) and Wang Anyi, had relied to a great extent on their own experiences in depicting the city's everyday lives and spaces.

Figure 2: The Historical Skyline of the Bund Has Transformed



Source: October 2010 © Samuel Y. Liang.

While Liulu constructs Shanghai quite differently than these earlier woman writers, she shares with them some literary themes, especially that of the role of women in the city. In a sense, she builds upon the established literary tradition of Shanghai women and everyday life. In *Woju*, the changing image of Shanghai city is accompanied by the relatively unchanging types of Shanghai women as frugal, hardworking housewives and as rich men's mistresses. By re-presenting these literary types in the new era, Liulu demonstrates a certain continuity with the old Shanghai.

Overall, *Woju* gives us an intriguing picture of post-socialist Shanghai: its old and new residents, their spaces of living, and the social cost of the spatial transformation. As shown in the series' opening credits, the city now looks quite strange and unsettling: a smog-blurred new skyline rising above the barely visible historical skyline of the Bund from behind; the sleek facades of skyscrapers and malls in sharp contrast to rustic old stores and houses and the ruins of demolished neighbourhoods – ambivalent images of hope and loss (Figure 2).

Haiping: From a *Longtang* Housewife to a “Property Slave”

Traces of old Shanghai are still found within the new concrete jungle; they are hidden behind shining architectural facades, expressways, and shopping malls. The vast amount of low-rise housing built during the real-estate boom of the early twentieth century is yet to be totally demolished and rebuilt in the current redevelopment craze. Pockets of old neighbourhoods remain, but their function and residents have changed (Figure 3). This change is vividly illustrated in *Woju*.

Woju's first scene is set in the year 1998, and the audience sees a small neighbourhood street (*longtang*) leading to rows of *shikumen* houses. The gables of these houses face the street and are decorated with neighbourhood notice boards, which were first created as propaganda bulletins in the socialist era. On the street, one takes in the bustle of neighbourhood residents who walk amidst a chaotic display of hanging laundries and sprawling wires and fixtures on the buildings.

A young couple get into the *longtang* with their luggage and the woman declares: “This is our home!” They are the protagonist Guo Haiping and her boyfriend Su Chun. Originally from hinterland towns, they have just graduated from a prestigious university in Shanghai and decided to stay in the city. They earn several thousand CNY a month, but in order to save money, they rent a room of about ten square metres for only 650 CNY per month in this old neighbourhood. They get married one year later and live in the same room for about seven years until the neighbourhood is demolished for redevelopment. Throughout these years, the room becomes quite crowded at times: When Haiping's sister Haizao graduates (in 2003) and is looking for a job in the city, she moves into the room and sleeps on the floor for about half a year; when Haiping has a baby, her mother comes to help, and Su Chun has to sleep on

the floor. They share the kitchen and bathroom with other families in the *longtang* house.

Such crowded living conditions are not new to residents of Shanghai. In the socialist era, a room in a *longtang* house usually accommodated a family of three generations, who used curtains to subdivide the room into sleeping quarters at night and shared the kitchen and bathroom with up to ten other families in the housing unit. Since the 1980s the city has substantially increased the per capita living space by rebuilding old neighbourhoods and relocating their residents to new housing, but a shortage of living space persists in the old socialist neighbourhoods.

Figure 3: An Old *longtang* Neighbourhood Near Datian Road in Shanghai



Source: July 2007 © Samuel Y. Liang.

In *Woju*, some of Haiping's local neighbours are unemployed, and their daily survival relies on "minimum living allowances" (最低生活保障, *zuidi shenghuo baozhang*) received from the government. They either have been laid-off or have retired from socialist work units. Among them are the Li family of three generations, who live in a ten-square-metre room. Every

day, Granma Li visits the neighbourhood market to pick up some discarded vegetables and make a meal with them. Her son and daughter-in-law, Lao Li and Xu Li, seek temporary employment, usually working as a doorman and a domestic maid, respectively. Working as a doorman for a video game shop, Lao Li is once beaten by a disgruntled parent who complains that his son has spent too much time in the shop. Xu Li once works as a maid for a wealthy single woman and takes home her leftover meals. The couple's son now lives in a college dormitory and only occasionally returns home. The monthly rent of a room in a *longtang*, paid to the city's Housing Management Bureau, is about 50 CNY. Some well-to-do residents have moved to better housing and have let their rooms to new immigrants for several hundred CNY per month.

Among these immigrants are some young college graduates from other provinces. They are attracted to the city and do not want to return home. When Haizao is graduating from a university and considering returning to her hometown, Haiping persuades her to stay in Shanghai: "Does our hometown have Izetan or World Expo? Is it an international metropolis?" What attracts them to stay also makes the city more expensive and exclusive. They can only afford to rent a room in the *longtang* or in an old apartment building built in the socialist era, and adopt a frugal lifestyle while saving money to buy a "middle-class" home. They consider themselves distinct from the neighbourhood's old, working-class residents: These well-educated immigrants represent the new era of globalization that stands in contrast to the socialist era, aspects of which seem to linger in the old neighbourhood.

Haiping does not think she belongs to the neighbourhood; she says on one occasion:

I believe my future is certainly not in this dilapidated *longtang*, not falling into the same category as the store saleswoman on the first floor, the cleaner on the second floor, or the canteen cook on the third floor. My future will certainly be better than theirs.

Her *woju* (awkward living) in the neighbourhood is indeed temporary – it is a stage in her life in which she saves money to purchase a new home which would make her distinct from her working-class neighbours.

Haiping makes the above comment after a quarrel with Xu Li about using each other's water and cooking oil in the kitchen. On another occasion, a neighbour in the kitchen asks Haiping to pay a higher share of the water fee since her sister has just moved into her room. Haiping is upset and reminds the neighbour that she had not paid a higher share

when her daughter moved into her room earlier. At other times, the neighbours are very friendly and helpful: They pick up laundry that has fallen to the ground for each other, and when Haiping has a baby, a neighbour sends them a mesh used to cover leftover food.

In the shared kitchen, the families make strict arrangements about using the shared resources. Each family has a gas stove and a light bulb above it, and next to the stove an array of bottles and cans is set against the oil-stained wall, as there are no cupboards. At dinner time, all the housewives are in the kitchen cooking for their respective families, and Haiping has to negotiate with her neighbours for the shared resources. Thus, contrary to her subjectivity of being distinct from the locals, she in fact “falls” into the same category of women as maids, cleaners, and unemployed housewives. Living in a neighbourhood of *xiao shimin* (小市民, “petty urbanites”), she becomes a typical parsimonious and shrewd Shanghai housewife who manages the family affairs and makes key decisions for her family. This young college graduate is certainly transformed by the *longtang*. Since it was first created, in the late nineteenth century, this distinct type of residential neighbourhood has always both accommodated and transformed new immigrants (Liang 2010: 87-112; Lu 1999). The *longtang* seems to have perpetuated the city’s distinct urban identity.

When Haiping is pregnant, she looks to buy a home. At the time (probably in 2004), the real-estate boom had just begun and property prices were still not extremely high. She and Su Chun can only afford to buy an old property. But Haiping is not satisfied with the old designs and “unreasonable” prices of the properties she views. Eventually, she makes a decision and pays the initial deposit (定金, *dingjin*) on a property, but the owner ends up backing out of the deal and selling it to a higher bidder. After that, property prices rise rapidly beyond her reach while she sits with her newborn in the *longtang* room.

Because of the room’s poor conditions and her financial stringency, Haiping lets her mother take the baby to their hometown. As Haiping suffers from the separation from her daughter, she eventually decides to buy a property at any cost so that she can bring her back. At this point, property prices (in city-centre areas) are prohibitively high, and she still considers old properties to be poorly designed and to have bad feng shui. She finally chooses to buy a new property in a remote suburb about a three-hour bus ride from the city centre. Her and Su Chun’s savings cannot cover the first payment (30 per cent of the property cost), and

they have to rely on “contributions” from their parents and even borrow money from Haizao.

The “contribution” from Su Chun’s low-income parents is in fact what he has borrowed under Haiping’s pressure. When Haiping later finds out the loan’s interest rate is a bit high, she is so upset that she runs away from home to Haizao’s place, crying that she is considering divorcing Su Chun. Haizao helps her sister to pay back the loan by “borrowing” money from Song Siming, a high-ranking official with whom she will eventually have a relationship.

Under the financial burden of purchasing and decorating their new home, Haiping and Su Chun adopt a very frugal lifestyle and work for multiple employers. They eat plain noodles as their main meal every day, while Haiping begins her second job of tutoring expatriates in Chinese. For the next 20 years, they will continue to be burdened with the pressure of mortgage repayments, which cost two thirds of their combined income. At the end of the show, after moving into their dream home, Haiping characterizes her everyday life:

Every morning when I first open my eyes, [I see] a series of digits jumping out: mortgage 6,000; food and clothing 2,500; kindergarten fee 1,500; social networking 600; commuting 580; property management 340; mobile phone bill 250; and utilities 200. [...] Thus, from the first breath after I wake up, I have to earn at least 400 everyday – at least! This is the cost of my life in the city: Those digits force me not to be slack for a single day.

As such, the struggle of young immigrants to become middle-class homeowners and then sustain a middle-class home ironically makes them feel like slaves working for the banks and developers.

Haiping’s story exemplifies the life course of a “white-collar” immigrant in a great Chinese metropolis: from a hinterland town to a college to a cheap rental room and finally to a suburban apartment. There is a struggle to get inside the city as well as to get out of it. Haiping feels alienated in the *longtang*, but this inexpensive neighbourhood allows her to stay and access the opportunities of an international metropolis. Her eventual success in earning a place of her own ironically forces her to move out of the city, as her new home is at the fringe of the city, where her mobile phone receives signals from Jiangsu Province rather than Shanghai. This experience of alienation and relocation connotes a negation of Shanghai’s historical identity.

As a literary construct, Haiping lacks the distinct character of Shanghai women as seen in the earlier works of Wang Anyi and Zhang Ailing. Her life in the *longtang* is not integrated into the urban environment. Rather, she represents new residents who intrude into the local community and fragment it, as they replace some original, well-to-do residents (who let out the rooms); these new residents consist of not only young white collars but also migrant labourers from rural villages. This fragmentation causes the loss of the integrated sense of community and the neighbourhood's historical identity. In Liulu's literary construct (based on her Internet experience), the *longtang* lacks the endless neighbourhood chatters and gossips that weave together a community of diverse residents – rich and poor, young and old, men and women – in Wang's and Zhang's works. Instead, Haiping's social life in the *longtang* mainly consists of quarrels with her husband (whom she considers to be impotent in bringing wealth to the family) within their small room – a common scene of a struggling family in any city rather than being particular to Shanghai.

The *longtang* in *Woju* is a fragmented community of young immigrants and ageing low-income residents. In them, the pride of an old Shanghai identity and the sense of belonging are lost. They admire the city's wealth and glamour that have evaded their own neighbourhood, which they look to move out of. After Haiping moves out of the *longtang*, she leaves old Shanghai behind and becomes a typical “mortgage slave” in a new neighbourhood that is just one of the myriad characterless developments that have mushroomed in Shanghai and other great cities.

The Li Family and the Demise of the *longtang*

The relatively inexpensive housing in remote suburbs provides homes not only for “successful” new immigrants but also for relocated residents from city-centre areas. In *Woju*, when Haiping finds out that her *longtang* neighbour Lao Li is to become her neighbour again in the new compound, she feels her middle-class identity is compromised and complains: “After all these years of struggle, I am still the neighbour of a *dibao* (低保, one who receives the minimum living allowance).”

In comparison, it is a little easier for local residents to buy their new home in a “middle-class” neighbourhood, as the compensation for their original residence covers a great portion of the cost of their new home. Many such residents are tired of living in dilapidated *longtang* houses and

would accept the compensation offered by the developer or relocation company and buy a new home with that money plus their savings.

In *Wuju*, when Lao Li is pleased to report to his family the news that their neighbourhood is to be demolished for redevelopment, Granma Li reminds him that a normal compensation for their ten-square-metre room is not enough to buy a property in the city or the suburbs. She thinks that since the family members have no education, skills, or social status, and lack a high income, they should refuse to move out unless the relocation company provides them a full-sized apartment as compensation.

As a contractor of the developer, the relocation company is assisted by the neighbourhood committee (居委会, *juweibui*) and street office – the local government’s administrative branches since the socialist era – in its negotiation with the residents. The cadres from these grassroots units meet the residents and urge them to accept the compensation offered by the company. One cadre attempts to persuade Granma Li to move out by using the Maoist revolutionary rhetoric:

An opportunity once in a thousand years is coming. Like waiting for the stars and the moon, we’ve finally got it: *chaiqian* (demolition and relocation)! Earlier, we saw others moving into new apartments, while we ourselves still had to use chamberpots [in old houses without modern facilities]. Now we have the opportunity to move [into new housing].

Another cadre urges Granma Li to follow Shanghai’s trend (形势, *xingshi*) of constructing new buildings and demolishing old houses and wonders why she still wants to live with three generations under one roof. Granma Li replies:

This old house is really good: warm in winter and cool in summer. It does not cost me a penny. It is in a good location; the hospital is within walking distance. For low-income residents like us, saving money is most important. I am so old now, where do you want me to move to? The suburb far from the city? Now this world has really changed. Those from other provinces and foreign countries kick us out so that they can live in city-centre areas in upscale locations. This utterly tears apart our old neighbours who have lived together for decades. The longer we old Shanghai folks live, the lower [*jian*] we become.

Led by Granma Li, the family refuses to move out their room when the relocation company rejects their request for a full-sized apartment. The

Figure 4: A *Longtang* Neighbourhood at Taixing Road and Wuding Road Being Demolished



Source: 2007 © Samuel Y. Liang.

family then becomes a so-called “nail household” (钉子户, *dīngzǐhù*) – like a nail that cannot be plucked out.

With the cadres’ help, the relocation company negotiates with the neighbourhood families one by one. The company has built properties in a remote suburban area, and they are being sold during the negotiations with the families, who could use their compensations plus some savings to purchase or exchange their old homes for new suburban apartments. Once the company reaches an agreement with a family, the latter would receive compensation and move out. When a housing unit is cleared of its residents, the company rips off its roof and turns it into ruins even if residents in the next-door units are still negotiating for better compensations. The neighbourhood then becomes a strange mixture of ruins and residences (Figure 4). This uninhabitable environment adds pressure to the remaining residents who have yet to accept a compensation deal – as a manager of the relocation company puts it:

When bugs and rats crawl and sewage water flows in this area, the residents will then beg me to give them a deal in order to move out of it.

The Li family stubbornly hold on to their room amidst the rubble even after all their neighbours have moved out and the relocation company has cut off their water and electricity supplies. They light candles at night and use buckets to collect water from the construction site. Granma Li considers these difficult living conditions to be more tolerable than the hardship she endured during the Cultural Revolution. The frustrated company manager then instructs his workers to intimidate the Li family by setting a fire in the site, and Granma Li is killed unexpectedly. (In the novel, this is an explicit reference to the real incident at Urumqi Road mentioned above, but in the television series, Granma Li is instead killed by the falling roof of a room that the workers are demolishing without having notified the residents.) Because of this, the company ends up giving the family a full-sized apartment as compensation in order to avoid a lawsuit.

The death of Granma Li allegorizes the death of the *longtang* and of the old Shanghai. Fascinated by her perseverance in the negotiation, an official investigates her family history: It turns out that Granma Li's family owned the entire *longtang* compound before the revolution; during the Japanese occupation, her relatives "borrowed" rooms from her family, and after the war and the revolution they continued to live in the neighbourhood. Soon the compound was transformed into socialist housing and more residents moved in during the Cultural Revolution; Granma Li's family then kept only a ten-square-metre room. This experience of her family's decline served to harden her toward the people and things around her, as she tells her son and daughter-in-law:

When your father died, I did not feel sad at all. Finally I can stretch out my legs in the bed after all these years. When you get something, you will lose something.

When the entire compound – her former family property – is being demolished, she holds on to its last room to fight for a modern apartment, for the future of her son and grandson. Finally it costs her life. Months after her death, Lao Li and Xu Li are thrilled to see their brand-new, comfortably sized and high-quality apartment. They then feel grateful to Granma Li, but they seem yet to realize that along with Granma Li, the old Shanghai is also gone: Their old neighbourhood was totally destroyed

and their neighbours have been removed and dispersed from the old urban core.

Who is behind this destruction of old Shanghai? Not just the developer and the relocation company but also the city's bureaucrats and planners. The latter make plans to rebuild the old socialist neighbourhoods into new transnational spaces and rely on their allies in the private sector to implement the plans. This process breeds corruption and social injustices.

The Illegitimate Home of Song Siming and Haizao

In *Woju*, Song Siming is the mayor's first aid (secretary) and is involved in the redevelopment of the *longtang* neighbourhood. He and the mayor sell the site to a friend's company for an extremely low price, which is justified by their plan to rebuild the site into a public park. But soon after the sale, they have the plan changed to allow the company to build commercial properties on the site. Their next ambitious plan is to repackage a small company owned by their protégé (the relocation company mentioned above) into a shareholding company that issue stocks in Hong Kong. This plan is financed with an illegal bank loan, which is eventually investigated and causes Song's downfall.

As a man in his early forties, Song is among the first generation of university graduates after the Cultural Revolution. He is knowledgeable in urban redevelopment and exemplifies a new generation of technocrats even more powerful than old-style bureaucrats (Liu Xin 2009). He is well connected with friends in the financial and legal sectors. His office is elegantly furnished, looking not so different from a CEO's office, and is frequented by his friends in the private sector. Song drives his sedan or Range Rover in and out of the city's administrative complex, whose sleek facade and monumental, axial layout resembles the Shanghai Municipal Building at People's Square, which in fact looks quite similar to other edgy, corporate buildings in the city. Song also visits a range of high-end venues, including private clubs, exquisite restaurants, and suburban retreats such as a golf course, where he and friends in the real-estate and financial sectors discuss business plans and how to profit from land transactions.

Song's family lives in a civil-servant neighbourhood built a couple of decades earlier. The neighbourhood environs are unassuming, while the interior of their apartment appears well decorated. This home functions

merely as Song's bedroom: He always leaves it early in the morning and returns to it late at night because of his busy work schedule and related social activities. His relationship with his wife soon becomes strained.

His friends in the private sector all have young women as their mistresses or lovers, women who become necessary symbols of their success or elite status. Song feels left out their circle because he does not have one (Liulu 2007: 17). He then pursues a love affair with Haizao, who has known him through working for the relocation company (also a real-estate developer). Song wins Haizao's love by solving any problems of hers (and those of her sister, Haiping); he lends or gives her money and lets Haiping's family live in a luxury apartment free of charge. He uses a villa in a remote location for his love affair with Haizao, and eventually keeps her as his mistress in the aforementioned luxury apartment (after Haiping moves out of it). Both the villa and the apartment are provided by the relocation company. After making Haizao the legal owner of the apartment, Song replaces its modern-style IKEA furniture with imported Italian furniture.

As a college graduate born in the early 1980s, Haizao represents a different age group than her sister Haiping, who was born in the 1970s. Before she meets Song, Haizao and her then-boyfriend rented a room in a three-bedroom apartment in a residential walk-up built a couple of decades earlier. Their housemates were all young couples as well. If the other young couples got married and had children, they would all have to buy a new home of their own. It is even more difficult for a couple in this age group to earn a place in the city. But, in contrast to Haiping's hard struggle, Haizao's access to luxury life is by way of an easy shortcut; the sisters' approaches to their respective relationships and material lives are entirely different. Haizao's youth and beauty, rather than labour, are exchanged for material gains and sexual pleasures in an illegitimate relationship with Song. For her, enjoying a luxurious life seems to be more important than a proper or legitimate relationship. After juggling her boyfriend and Song for a while, she eventually moves into Song's secret apartment as a "professional mistress" (职业二奶, *zhíyè ernai*).

The *ernai*, meaning "second wife", is also called the *xiaosan* (小三) or "third person" in the relationship of a married couple. She is blamed for causing moral decline in the economic development. Haizao thus represents corruption in the urban-development programme, which channels the city's surplus wealth (accumulated through the hard work of people like Haiping) into the pockets of (male) bureaucratic and business elites.

Their private life is then marked by the extravagant consumption of Western-style material culture, such as imported cars and furniture. Yet this consumption seems to be a means to the gratification of their ultimate desire, which is to create a “home” other than their legitimate home – one that is hosted by a young mistress. This illegitimate home is in fact haunted by a ghost of old Shanghai.

In the last four decades of the Qing Dynasty, a rich Shanghai merchant usually spent a fortune on securing his exclusive access to an elite courtesan and then lived in her boudoir more than in his own residence; he might even eventually marry her as his concubine. The courtesan house then functioned as the merchant’s surrogate home (Liang 2010). In the Republican period, the city’s male elites would maintain for their concubines (姨太太, *yitaitai*) separate residences, which were called *xiaogongguan* (小公馆), or “little mansions”, meaning the “other” of the main (or legitimate) residences. This arrangement seemed to be a compromise with the city’s modernization that had antiquated the polygamist household of the late imperial elite.

As represented in contemporaneous literature, the hostess of a *xiaogongguan* is younger and more chic and attractive than her rival in the proper household, and the “male master” usually spends more time in her house than in the proper household. For example, Zhang Ailing’s well-known stories and novellas contain vivid portrayals of such characters who seem to be in a problematic position between tradition and modernity. In the short story *Liuqing* (留情, *Traces of Love*; Zhang [1945] 2006), Guo Feng is the hostess of a *xiaogongguan* and is married to the merchant Mi, who is about 30 years older. She grew up in a rich merchant family and her mother was a *yitaitai* (probably an ex-courtesan); her first husband died at the age of 23 and she then lived as a widow with her in-laws – many of whom were also *yitaitai* – until she married Mi. This experience has given her a charm similar to that found in the courtesan houses (Zhang [1945] 2006: 4). Mi now lives with Guo Feng and asks her for permission to visit his first wife, who is dying at an advanced age. Mi thinks his own fate is also approaching, and Guo Feng makes it clear to her relatives that her relationship with Mi is an act of financial assurance for her life after Mi’s death – which would leave her a sizeable inheritance. Thus, after a casual visit to a relative, they appear to be a loving couple walking home, harmoniously blending emotional sentiments with material concerns.

About half a century after Zhang Ailing, Wang Anyi reconstructed a *xiaogongguan* at the end of the Republican period in *Chang ben ge* (长恨歌, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*). The *xiaogongguan* is called Alice Apartment (爱丽丝公寓, *Ailisi gongyu*) and appears quiet, lonely and elegant in Wang's exhaustive depiction (Wang [1994] 2003: 85-89). Whereas the *xiaogongguan* in Zhang Ailing's works are usually venues of lively social activities such as mah-jong parties and tea parties, even with children playing, Alice Apartment is a secret space hidden from the public gaze. Here the hostess Wang Qiyao – who becomes the mistress of a high-ranking official after being crowned Miss Shanghai in a beauty pageant – spends much time alone waiting for the busy official to return.

Wang Anyi was born just after such *xiaogongguan* disappeared from socialist Shanghai. Her imaginative reconstruct of this spatial type in the reform era (the late 1980s and early 1990s) evoked nostalgia for old Shanghai. There is no evidence of the historical accuracy of this reconstruct, which was more likely inspired by the contemporary reinvention of the type, namely the apartment purchased or rented by a wealthy Hong Kong or Taiwanese businessman for his Mainland mistress. Such apartments are generally known as *ernai fang* (“mistress houses”) in the major coastal cities, particularly in Shenzhen.

Haizao's residence in *Woju* is the latest literary construct of this type. In many ways it is comparable to Alice Apartment retrospectively imagined by Wang Anyi. Like Wang Qiyao, Haizao is from a humble social background and leaves her original lover for a rich and powerful official and then spends much time in the apartment waiting for him to return. While Alice Apartment is hidden at the dead end of a quiet street, Haizao's apartment is inside a gated upscale compound in a central location. In this discreet space, Haizao becomes quite isolated from friends and society, being visited only by Song and Haiping. When at the end of the television drama Song is being investigated for corruption and rarely visits the apartment, Haizao feels hopelessly isolated in the luxurious environment.

From late-Qing courtesan houses to Republican-era *xiaogongguan* to post-socialist *ernai fang*, the other (or, illegitimate) home as a distinct spatial type seems to have persisted in the city, but its contemporary reinvention becomes an increasingly illegitimate, secret and isolated space and represents the male elite's futile effort to restore the dream of patriarchal power and patrilineal heritage. When Haizao is pregnant, Song persuades her to keep the baby. He later learns it is to be a boy, after he

has concluded that his own future is doomed; he then begs his wife to take care of the “only male descendent of the Song family” in case Haizao does not want to raise the baby by herself. This anachronistic dream is broken into pieces at the dramatic ending of the series: Haizao loses the baby in her body, and almost her own life as well, during a brawl with Song’s wife, and Song plunges to his death by driving into a truck as he is being pursued by the police. Thus the illegitimate home is also a fatal one – death and destruction now completes the “programme” of consuming the city’s surplus wealth.

Haizao’s choice to be a “professional mistress” is a topic of debate among the viewers. In an academic article, Jia Leilei (2010) considers *Woju* to be a problematic work and highlights the harmful effects of Haizao’s pursuit of “negative pleasure”: It destroys Chinese people’s belief in social justice and their spirit of struggle and hard work. This criticism reflects the authorities’ views of the series. Yet the debate potentially goes beyond simply criticizing official corruption to questioning the legitimacy of the city’s accumulation of wealth, which can hardly justify the enormous human cost on the part of the *fangnu* and old local residents. Those who approve of Haizao’s choice would say she got what she deserved as an ordinary urban resident. The wealth created in the process should be used to improve the lives of ordinary people. Thus, however illegitimate it is, channelling the elite’s wealth into such an ordinary woman (and her relatives) seems to be a balancing measure of the excessive accumulation, especially in a time when a radical redistribution of wealth through a political revolution is out of the question.

Conclusion

Haiping, Granma Li, and Haizao exemplify the figures of *fangnu* (property slave), *dingzihu* (nail household), and *ernai* (mistress), which have been highly profiled in the media. Their stories expose the issues of new immigrants under the pressure of high property prices, local residents being forced to relocate, and official corruption.

Haiping is a role model in the city’s economic development, as her struggle and success are said to have inspired millions of young immigrants to earn a place in the city. They are hard workers and consumers and play a productive role in the post-socialist economy that is primarily driven by property development and consumption. The real-estate market allows them to combine consumption with traditional-style accumu-

lation – namely, to live frugally while saving money for future investment/ consumption.

By contrast, Granma Li and her relatives represent less-productive people in the economy. Without skills and education, they subsist on social security allowances and poorly paid jobs. Their only asset is the low-cost housing acquired in the socialist era, which allows them to continue their “unproductive” lifestyle. The city is eager to eliminate such housing and residents. When Granma Li’s children are relocated to new housing in the suburbs, they will eventually adopt a consumerist lifestyle and become assimilated into the productive force of the urban economy.

Haizao is a controversial character. She is unproductive in the economy but leads an extravagant, consumerist lifestyle. Her youthful body would be an old symbol of the biological reproduction desired by the male elite, who historically wish to reproduce more descendents by having multiple wives or concubines. But as its reproductive function is now under the state’s strict control, the female body has become an object of pleasure and a subject of consumption. In fact, Haizao’s body becomes integrated into the material setting of luxury housing that is in fact an illegitimate consumption of the city’s surplus wealth, which has been mined from other “sites”, namely the sweating bodies of the *fangnu* or migrant workers and the land resources occupied by local residents.

Resources and prestige are redistributed between these urban characters as they are displaced into new physical settings in the city’s spatial reorganization: from tenements in the *longtang* or other types of old neighbourhoods to new apartments in remote locations, or to luxurious city-centre apartments or suburban villas. These urban spaces form a new urban geography of social stratification, which replaces the old city consisting of a relatively homogeneous spread of socialist and historical neighbourhoods. Shanghai’s different urban districts had historically been associated with different social prestige and classes, and with immigrants from different areas, such as Subai (North Jiangsu). The current social stratification, however, produced a new urban geography marked by a greater degree of social segregation and spatial fragmentation.

City-centre areas are now dominated by residential high-rises and commercial skyscrapers that negate the city’s distinct historical identity and local culture. The high-rises’ monumental facades and exquisite environments represent the city’s new superhuman power and transnational wealth rather than reproducing any neighbourhoods of intimate community life. The new apartments are isolated, interior spaces above the

ground level (whose windows open to abstract city views rather than to any neighbourhood spaces). The social contents of these interior “re-treats” within guarded complexes, and of luxurious villas in gated compounds, are not fully knowable, and they are then often imagined as the rich’s pleasure apartments or the expatriates’ abodes – just like those shown in *Woju*.

In the meantime, as the city expands, residential high-rises are also mushrooming in suburbs where land values are relatively low. They provide housing for new immigrants as well as relocated old city residents. Thus, old neighbours who have lived together for decades now live in isolated apartments in separate suburban locations. Such new housing becomes “bedroom communities” rather than lively neighbourhoods, as the residents make long, daily commutes to work in city-centre areas.

With the disappearance of old-style neighbourhoods, inexpensive, slow-paced living – such as idle chatting and loitering in front of household doorways – is replaced by a stressful, fast-paced lifestyle. Residents are always busy working, saving, investing and consuming; they have neither the time nor the need, or they simply find it difficult, to get to know their neighbours; instead, they are connected to relatives and friends through mobile phones, the Internet, or activities of consumption – all these means of social connection contribute to the economic growth.

This “isolated connection” in the age of Internet and globalization makes post-socialist Shanghai similar to other great cities in China and Asia. If Liulu can imaginatively reconstruct this Shanghai living under the same conditions of isolated connection, her success in Shanghai betrays the extent of the loss of the city’s distinct character. Whereas the earlier writers relied on years of experience in the city to capture its unique spirit, Liulu achieved almost the same degree of success in capturing the ethos of the city’s contemporary change while living a virtual life mostly in an anonymous apartment in the concrete jungle of Singapore. This success was possible precisely because the distinct Shanghai identity is already lost. What is left of Shanghai are fantastic images without substance. In the end, the city’s masses all “dwell like snails” in the city that increasingly represents the government and corporate powers that control the spatial reorganization process and the accumulation of wealth.

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