

## THE *FLÂNEUR* IN SHANGHAI IN CHINESE MODERNIST WRITING

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### INTRODUCTION: THE PLACE AND THE AUTHOR

Shanghai was still a small town until the 1840s but it became a modern city very quickly, as a result of being one of the five ports the Chinese government conceded to the imperial powers, after China was defeated by the British in the Opium War. By the 1930s Shanghai was already one of the largest cities in the world with a reputation as “the Paris of the Orient”, famous for its sophisticated cosmopolitanism. One of the most socially significant aspects of Shanghai as a metropolis was the city’s cultural atmosphere. From the 1920s Shanghai began to attract the best intellectuals from all over China; it became the centre of the Chinese print media and the place where many leading writers gathered synergy, absorbed ideas of all sorts and produced works that demonstrate an awareness and conscious integration of different literary traditions. With the highest concentration of literary journals and newspapers in China between the late 1920s and the 1930s, Shanghai had the most intense and lively literary debates across many political persuasions. Literary production and consumption were an intrinsic part of Shanghai’s modernity and evidence of its capacity for diversity and hybridity. Its modernist writings were an important contributing factor in China’s literary modernity and their significance has increasingly been recognised.<sup>1</sup>

Shi Zhecun (1905–2003) has been identified as one of the leading Chinese modernist writers active in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> He was born in Hangzhou and grew up in Suzhou, both cities not very far from Shanghai. The family moved closer to Shanghai when he was a teenager and in Shanghai he received secondary education from a missionary high school where the language of instruction was English. He studied French literature at the French missionary-run Aurora University, where he developed literacy in French and in

English.<sup>3</sup> He began publishing short stories at high school and was a prolific writer until about 1937, when he gave up creative writing and took up an academic career. His literary output includes several collections of short stories and essays in addition to a few score of poems. He is best remembered as the leading author of the school of 'neo-sensationalism' (*xinganjue pai*) and the editor of the journal *Les Contemporaines* (*Xiandai* 1932-1935), which systematically introduced the best in world literature to the Chinese audience.<sup>4</sup> From the 1950s to the early years of the 1980s Shi Zhecun's works were banned from the public by the Chinese communist authorities, primarily because his writing focused on the inner landscape of the individual, which was considered "decadent" and "bourgeois". The author thus lived in public oblivion for decades until his rediscovery by publishers, readers, and literary critics at the beginning of the 1990s.

Most noticeable about Shi Zhecun is his attitude towards Shanghai's semi-colonial situation. He did not consider himself a 'colonial subject' even though his secondary and tertiary education was colonial, for he neither worked directly under Western bosses in foreign companies, nor did he adopt the lifestyle and ideology of the colonisers. In his words, he was influenced by Western culture through arts and literature rather than by Shanghai's colonial practice.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, he regarded himself as an intellectual equal with writers of the world. He considered modernism an international movement and its internationality entailed a two-way traffic of mutual influence and inspiration between the writers of the West and the East. He was confident that his writing was modernist and that he was directly influenced by the best in French literature in the same way as Western writers were susceptible to influences from the East. The following statement clearly shows his understanding of mutual inspirations between the East and the West:

I think modernism in the 1930s was not local or national but international. It was a general tendency in literature. In each country there was a small minority of writers [who wrote in the modernist style] ... and all of these writers from different countries together formed a trend. Modernism was not [merely] a Euro-American phenomenon ... it was a simultaneously shared literary trend. Modernism in the West was influenced by Eastern culture. Obvious examples include Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound, but the influence was felt in different writers.... I always suspected that Emily Dickinson was also influenced by Chinese poetry, because there was no American predecessor to the kind of poetry she wrote.... to say that I "Easternized" modernism is wrong. It is Western modernism that is Easternized, and my modernism Westernized.<sup>6</sup>

As expressed in the above quotation, Shi Zhecun's central concern about the modernist movement is intertextuality between his own literary writing and works from other literary traditions. According to Leo Ou-Fan Lee, "most of his experimental stories were not simply inspired by but literarily constructed on the Western works he had read. His short stories therefore offer an interesting case study of a different kind of intertextual transaction".<sup>7</sup> My intention in this paper, however, is not to assess the intertextuality of Shi Zhecun's works in general. Nor do I intend to examine the broad spectrum of Chinese modernism and its interaction with modernism in the West. My purpose here is to provide a concrete example of Chinese-Western cross-cultural fertilisation through the modernist literary figure of the *flâneur*.

### THE FLÂNEUR AND HIS HISTORICAL MEANING

The major reason for choosing the figure of the *flâneur* as the focal point derives from the understanding that modernism as a mode of aesthetics articulates through such a figure the characteristics of the altered relations between society and the individual in the modern metropolis. In his studies of modernist literary movement in nineteenth century Paris, Walter Benjamin identifies the figure of the *flâneur* as the quintessential signifier of the Parisian urban modernity. Benjamin considers the *flâneur* as the heroic figure, who stands out against the background of the population as "the true subject of modernism".<sup>8</sup> For Benjamin, observation is a heroic act and the detective who has been acted out by the *flâneur* transforms the solitary wandering of the city streets into the heroic observation of the urban quotidian of the modern era. Benjamin's focus on the figure of the *flâneur* affords significant insights into the relationship between the individual subject and his modern, urban environment, in particular, the relationship between the artist and the city.

This figure of the *flâneur*, however, has barely been recognised in the studies of Chinese modernist texts and to date only two scholars have given some thought to this matter. In his study of Shanghai between 1930 and 1945, Leo Ou-Fan Lee categorically denies the existence of the *flâneur* figure in the city for a number of reasons. He sees Paris in the nineteenth century as a very different urban space from Shanghai in the 1930s. Comparatively speaking, Shanghai was far more cosmopolitan than Paris had been in the 19th century; Paris had the fantastic arcades for the *flâneur* to walk in whereas in Shanghai there were only department stores which in time undertook the function of mass entertainment, leaving no place for the *flâneur* to hang around; it took much

longer for Paris to evolve into a modern city whereas Shanghai leaped into modern cosmopolitanism in just a few decades and this contrasting evolution entailed a difference in the attitudes of the writers towards their city: the French writers and artists developed a critical attitude towards their modernity whereas Chinese writers did not. Lee argues that there was no possibility of the Chinese writers rebelling against modernity, because they were "too much enamoured of the city and too immersed in the excitements it provides to achieve an attitude of ambivalence and ironic detachment".<sup>9</sup> As a result, Chinese writers in Shanghai at the time lacked the capacity for the critical reflection of the urban modernity they were experiencing which is, in Lee's opinion, essential for the *flâneur*, a modern artist who consciously rebels against the very circumstances which have made his existence possible. All these factors, Lee concludes, have prevented the emergence of the *flâneur* figure in Chinese modernist writing. I should add that Lee's assessment examines the writers only, not the characters in their works.

Differing from Lee's view, Zhang Yingjin has identified several incarnations of the *flâneur* figure in the literary writings of the early decades in Shanghai.<sup>10</sup> Based on his analysis of the writings set in Shanghai at the time by various writers, Zhang argues that the city of Shanghai is gendered ... as a masked woman full of secrecy and mystery, and consequently it offers ample opportunity for intellectual delight and erotic pleasure to the male *flâneur*/dandy/detective, who is otherwise lost in the city labyrinth, in being able to decode the secret message and to figure out the real identity of the woman/city.<sup>11</sup> Lee, however, dismisses Zhang's assertion completely, declaring that the literary figures Zhang deals with are merely dandies of "passivity, narcissism and excessive sentimentality" and therefore "the hallmarks of a bygone era".<sup>12</sup>

I believe that the *flâneur* figure was present in Shanghai's modernist writing, although the Chinese *flâneur* has his own characteristics. Leo Lee's dismissal of the Chinese *flâneur* is primarily based on an understanding of modernism as a cultural experience of modernity. He fails to see that modernism can also be an aesthetic project in the case of the creation of the *flâneur* figure in Chinese modernist writing. With his exclusive focus on the writers and their enthusiasm for Shanghai's cosmopolitanism, Lee naturally finds no evidence of critical reflection on the part of the writers. The distinction between modernism as a cultural experience and an aesthetic project in this instance, however,

is crucial. Mary Gluck, for instance, identifies two types of narratives about *flânerie*. The first is that of the popular *flâneur* as “real” personalities in the crowds with images pictured in Parisian newspapers with their characteristic hats and walking canes or umbrellas. The second is that of the avant-garde *flâneur*, who is a literary figure in fiction and poetry. She specifically points out that distinguishing these two types helps to differentiate modernity as a cultural experience and modernism as an aesthetic project.<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin also stresses that “it turns out that Baudelaire’s *flâneur* was not a self-portrait of the poet to the extent that this might be assumed. An important trait of the real-life Baudelaire—that is, of the man committed to his work—is not part of this portrayal: his absentmindedness”.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, writers in Shanghai in the 1920s and 30s embraced modernism as cultural experience wholeheartedly. But equally significant is that they experimented with many kinds of narrative modes recently imported from the West and Japan, which Lee otherwise fully recognises in his study, with the exception of the case of the *flâneur* figure.

In Lee’s assessment, a critical attitude towards the modern city is an essential qualification for the *flâneur* figure. This is not the case either in the initial identification of the *flâneur* figure by Walter Benjamin or by contemporary scholars. The *flâneur*, as commonly defined, is an educated, eccentric male wandering through the city taking pleasure in observing daily life, although “the precise meaning of *flânerie* remains more than a little elusive”.<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary critical discussions have produced as many images of the flâneur as there are conceptions of the modern.... most frequently, the flâneur has been identified with a certain kind of fluid, aestheticised sensibility that implies the abdication of political, moral or cognitive control over the world.<sup>16</sup>

What is essential for the existence of the *flâneur* is the modern metropolis, which provides the *flâneur* with anonymity, freedom of movement, the safety of the streets, a public transport system, interesting and varied architecture and cityscape, and much more. In addition, the *flâneur* needs to be alone, in possession of the ‘necessary’ poetic melancholy and the ability to detach himself from the crowds and from his own cherished solitude. Shi Zhecun, well-known for his literary experiments and familiar with French literature, may well have had in mind the *flâneur* figure of nineteenth century Paris. I will argue that the “I” in the story of “One Evening” is a typical *flâneur*, the gentleman stroller of the city street who, in the expression of Charles Baudelaire, the nineteenth century French poet and writer, goes “botanising on the asphalt”, that is, walking about observing the street scenes.<sup>17</sup>

**“ONE EVENING IN THE RAINY SEASON”: THE ACCOUNT OF A FLÂNEUR**

“One Evening in the Rainy Season” is a short story which recounts the experience of a young man on a rainy evening after work in central Shanghai in the 1920s.<sup>18</sup> He is in his early twenties, married, educated, holding an office job in the city. He and his wife live in an apartment within walking distance from his office. It is his custom not to rush home in the evenings, but to wander around town, observing the streets and crowds. He makes a point not to use public transport, especially when it rains, for he finds other passengers annoying in their rubber raincoats dripping water on him. He prefers to stroll underneath his umbrella, even though cars may splash dirty water onto the footpaths. Although Shanghai is not his native place, he has lived there for a long time, long enough to know that the pedestrian rule of the city is to rush across the streets in the gaps of traffic and he does so with great confidence. He knows the streets of central Shanghai like the palm of his hand and he reads the city as a text with insight into its labyrinthine streets. He is attached to the city more than to his home and shows more interest in strangers than in his wife. He cherishes his solitude in crowds more than his domestic intimacy.

On this rainy evening in particular, he is once again in no rush to go home. He can finish work at five but deliberately lingers on until six o'clock. Carrying his umbrella, he sets out to walk home, taking as many detours as possible. Very soon it reaches seven thirty and it starts raining again so he stops to take shelter in front of a shop, facing the bus stop. When a bus pulls over, he joyfully watches passengers getting off one by one: a Russian woman in a red leather rain jacket; a middle-aged Japanese woman who he knows is the owner of a fruit shop nearby; some Chinese businessmen in the “Chinese-style green mackintosh” and at last a young, beautiful woman.

He is attracted to the woman immediately. It happens that the woman does not have an umbrella and that there are no rickshaws in sight either. She also comes under the eaves to shield herself from the rain so he takes the opportunity to stand close to her. Seeing that she is in a hurry to reach her destination, he offers to accompany her and to share his umbrella with her. She accepts and they walk shoulder to shoulder in the rain. Under the cover of the umbrella the two of them say nothing for sometime, and the woman is apparently a little uncomfortable with the intimacy imposed by the umbrella. He is overwhelmed by her beauty and tries his best to overcome the illusion that she was indeed his first sweetheart at fourteen, seven years ago. Just as he is

figuring out how to ask for her address, she thanks him politely and bids him goodbye. In his distress, he suddenly realises that the rain has stopped and that it is getting really late. He jumps onto the first rickshaw to rush home and lies to his wife about his detour.

With the narrative conducted in the first person, the narrator is also the central character and his detailed descriptions show that he is a keen observer of Shanghai's cityscape. Although there is also the intensity of moments when he is distracted by his female companion, his joy in walking around the city prevails. The narrative foregrounds the protagonist's delight in solitude, a trademark for the figure of the *flâneur* and, when it comes to the artist standing alone in the city crowds, the heroic pose of the modern individual transcending the quotidian.<sup>19</sup> Like his literary predecessors in Paris, the *flâneur* in Shanghai also experiences the city by walking the streets at his leisure. He is autonomous, as much as he wishes to be, and his wandering around is for pure enjoyment. He takes great pleasure in immersing himself in the city and he indulges himself in observing the details of his surroundings—the shops, the buses, the skylines, office buildings and the illuminated sky from the streetlights. He is like a fish in water, roaming the streets aware that the clock on the clock tower at the central railway station can tell him what time it is, although he is not particularly concerned about the time. He studies the passengers with great fascination and yet at the same time remains detached from all. Only, of course, until someone or some incident draws his special attention. Also like the *flâneur* in Paris, he takes an almost voyeuristic pleasure in his observations. The behaviour of the protagonist reveals an autonomous, independent subject and the story is a rendering of the modernist understanding of the relation between a free individual and his urban habitat.

#### THE URBAN FLÂNEUR IN THE RAIN: CONVERGENCE OF TRADITIONS IN MODERNITY

In the Chinese literati traditions there has often been the wanderer, an accomplished scholar/official who disengages from society and chooses to wander, whether in the city, in the country or in the wilderness.<sup>20</sup> The Chinese literati have always related to crowds in a detached manner in the sense that a scholar could and often did lead a reclusive life among the crowds. This practice is well summarised in the Chinese proverb: *dayin yushi*, the greatest recluse lives in the city/market, where in the crowds his identity can be kept hidden, at least temporarily. Like a *flâneur* taking a stroll in the arcade, the scholar-wanderer frequents markets to observe and, on occasions, interact with the locals. He may

even write about his experiences. He shares with the modern *flâneur* a few characteristics: both are detached from their social environments and, as artists, inclined towards melancholy. The treasured solitude is also the necessary ingredient for both the journey of *flânerie* and the traditional wanderer. However, the traditional wanderer and the *flâneur* also differ in a number of ways. The *flâneur* roams the city streets only, and remains anonymous. If removed from the city, the *flâneur* ceases to exist. The traditional wanderer wanders everywhere and it is not always possible for him to retain anonymity. More often than not he is in an imposed or self-imposed exile, very probably as a result of his previous “heroic” deeds that make him stand out socially or politically. Their attitudes towards nature are also different—the *flâneur* is oblivious of the countryside or nature, whereas the wanderer often projects himself onto the landscape or identifies with nature, drawing affinities with, for example, a pine tree or the lonely moon. For the *flâneur* and the wanderer, melancholy is a necessary state of mind, but their melancholy is usually triggered off by very different stimulants, related to their own cultural traditions. However, what fundamentally distinguishes a traditional wanderer from a *flâneur* is not how they interact with the urban environment or crowds, rather, it is how they are related to the state as part of the political structure. In a modern metropolis, the state generally leaves the individual alone and his freedom is more or less guaranteed as long as he does not disobey the law. For the scholar, it does not matter how much he detaches himself from the political process, he remains the emperor/dictator’s subject, his autonomy is conditional and can always be compromised.

When Shi Zhecun insists that his writings belong to the Eastern modernist movement, it is possible that he is talking about how Chinese modernist writing evolves from both its own literary traditions and the influences from the West and Japan. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, the rain plays a significant role as a stimulant of emotions and serves as a metaphorical connection between the sexes. The *flâneur* protagonist in “One Evening” bears a few traces of the scholar-wanderer of the past. Most noticeably, he functions in the parameters of the discourse of “qing”, the emotional pattern in the Chinese literati tradition, which has a special relation with unrequited love. Other ingredients include rain and the mood of bitter-sweet melancholy. In this instance, of course, the rain is also part of Shanghai’s cityscape—every year, in the rainy season, rainy days may continue for weeks and Shanghai locals have to cope with the rain and high humidity. The protagonist, however, cherishes a special fondness for the rain. He rejects the protection of public



transport and is snobbish about those Chinese businessmen wearing the “Chinese-style green rubber raincoats”. Because the narrator “I” lives in the two intersecting cultural traditions, nobody around him seems to understand his romantic sentiment towards the rain, nor does he bother to explain it to anyone.

The “I” narrator enjoys walking in the rain, so much so that carrying his umbrella with him becomes part of the ritual of his roaming the city streets. When the umbrella gives him the opportunity to talk the pretty young woman into accepting his offer of companionship, it becomes the alternative phallus and renders their walking together sexual. He is overtly excited and in his excitement he mistakes her for the puppy-love girlfriend of his teens. This romantic insertion is necessary to break the routine of his daily *flânerie* and conveys the emotional dimension necessary for a *flâneur* with a traditional Chinese education, Western literary knowledge and modernist sentiments. In the case of “One Evening”, it is important to realise that in the Chinese literati tradition, his solitude is not compromised but enhanced by female companionship. The solitary journey for growth and self-discovery of the educated Chinese male does not preclude interactions with the masses or with women. To some extent, these interactions are regarded as necessary distractions for the development of the educated male. Gao Xingjian’s novel, *Soul Mountain*, is a poignant example in this instance.<sup>21</sup> In the novel, the male protagonist undertakes a journey of self-discovery through self-reflection and philosophical contemplation while physically escaping from political persecution. His solitude is intact despite his frequent interactions with locals and women on his route. For the scholar-wanderer, the inner journey of self-discovery is always enhanced by the external journey of discovering his Other, be the Other uneducated and uncultivated women or nature. He and his Other have few exchanges and, if any does occur, there is no true interaction, for he remains introspective. “One Evening” returns to the Chinese tradition of the wanderer with regard to male-female interactions. When the male narrator looks at his female companion, he does so as if he is viewing another urban spectacle. At the same time his thoughts are easily distracted: one minute he thinks about his youth, the next he recalls a Japanese painting brought to mind by the image of the woman battling against the storm. Like a *flâneur* elsewhere, the protagonist on the rainy evening in Shanghai is physically with the crowd on the street and yet his mind continually wanders.

The rain is given a special rôle in the *flânerie* of the Chinese modernist wanderer in the city, foregrounded in the urban scenery to invoke the *flâneur's* sentiment of melancholy. Shi Zhecun's best friend, Dai Wangshu (1905-1950), another modernist writer and poet active in the 1920s and 30s in Shanghai, published a poem entitled "The Lane in the Rain" (1928), which is almost a poetic predecessor to the story "One Evening". The poem is about the poet taking a walk in the rain in a lane, typically with his umbrella, fantasising an infatuation with a beautiful, melancholic girl. The poem is also a first-person narrative able to evoke both the external and internal landscapes. While the narrator in "One Evening" laughs at the crowds running away from the rain and manages to find a quiet female companion, the poet in the rain simply imagines a melancholic girl as a fellow traveler:

"Alley in the Rain"

With an oil-paper umbrella, alone I  
Wander in a long  
Lonely alley in the rain,  
Hoping to meet  
A melancholy girl  
Like a lilac.

She has  
The colouring of a lilac,  
The fragrance of a lilac,  
The sorrow of a lilac—  
Melancholy in the rain,  
Melancholy and lost.

She wanders in the lonely alley in the rain  
With an oil-paper umbrella  
Like me,  
Just like me,  
Roaming quietly,  
Indifferent, sad, and wistful.

She comes close  
And casts  
A look like a sigh;  
She drifts by  
Like a dream,  
Like a sad, bewildering dream.  
She drifts by like a lilac  
In a dream;  
The girl drifts by me.

She walks farther and farther  
 Until she reaches the broken fence  
 At the end of the alley in the rain.

Gone is her colour,  
 Dimmed by the sad tune of the rain;  
 Gone is her fragrance;  
 Even her gaze like a sigh,  
 Her lilac like wistfulness,  
 Are dispersed.

Alone, with an oil-paper umbrella I  
 Wander in this long  
 Lonely alley in the rain,  
 Hoping to meet  
 A melancholy girl  
 Like a lilac.<sup>22</sup>

The basic elements of the Shanghai *flânerie* in the poem and the story are the same: the rain, the city, the *flâneur* with his umbrella, his taking his time in the street, and the desire for female companionship. The themes, sentiments and movements of the poet/*flâneur* all seem very similar. In both narratives there is also a dreamlike atmosphere when the male fantasy is being laid out. But the narrator in "One Evening" is more cheerful and he observes the urban spectacle with great joy, moreover being alone is not a burden. The poet on the other hand focuses on his need for sorrow and melancholy and his cultivation of a melancholic state of mind is highlighted by the less spectacular, indeed desolate, laneway in the rain, where the object of his desire drifts in and out of his view through his inner eye. The use of the inconspicuous flower lilac as the metaphor for his love object enhances the melancholic quality—lilac is quiet in its appearance and fragrance, just like the girl in his dream. The poet, like his counterpart in "One Evening", is interested in female companionship as part of the city spectacle—she attracts his gaze as something to be seen. When the poet/narrator lingers on the streets, armed with his umbrella, his thoughts dripping like the rain, his subjectivity displays the full complexity of cross-cultural modernist sensibility.

## CONCLUSION

The *flâneur* is a familiar figure and a conspicuous personality in modernist writings, even though there are variations in his appearance in different times and places. He connects the city with modernism through his willful involvement with and detachment from his surroundings.

The story of "One Evening" effectively demonstrates that the Chinese *flâneur* experiences the autonomy that modern, urban space allowed to such an individual as in other modern metropolises. As is the case elsewhere, the congregation of people in the city gives him the anonymity that individuals had never experienced before; the streets which were hazardous previously are now safe to walk around on foot; the public transport system encourages the movement of people and the shifting crowds constitute changing streetscapes for him to observe; the sounds and animation of central Shanghai urge him to involve himself and be detached at the same time. The narrator's attachment to "walking the street" demonstrates a changed relationship between the individual and society possible only in a modern metropolis, regardless of particular cultural traditions. As a *flâneur*, the narrator's liberty, solitude and distance best exemplify the modernist dilemmas: the individual versus the community, the city versus the native village, modernity versus tradition. Shi Zhecun's short story is a solitary and yet romantic *flânerie* and the narrative shows obvious connections with both the city of Shanghai as a cosmopolitan centre and the author's mental and emotional connections with Chinese literary traditions as well as literary emotional patterns. "One Evening" proves that the *flâneur* figure is a visible expression of modernism in many world cosmopolitan centres, whether in Shanghai, Tokyo, or Paris.

#### NOTES

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- 4 Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, p. 249.
- 5 Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, p. 343.
- 6 Shi Zhecun, interviewed by Shih Shu-Mei in 1990 (Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, p. 339).
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- 19 Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, pp. 70-71.
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