

***Shanghai Baby*, Chinese *Xiaozi*, and “Pirated” Lifestyles in the Age of Globalization**

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Abstract

The commonplace in the West is sensational in China—the Western readers may find the familiar lifestyles in the banned novel *Shanghai Baby* confusing. Knowledge of the culture associated with the popularity of *Shanghai Baby* in China becomes crucial for a proper understanding of the novel, which will eventually enrich one’s understanding of the Cold-War confrontation between China and the West in a changed form in the age of globalization. *Shanghai Baby* indicates a Chinese boom of *xiaozi* literature that emphasizes fashion, lifestyle, taste, and emotion in the leisure of everyday life. Body controls *xiaozi* experience at the expense of mind. This emphasis reflects China’s breaking away from the grip of the grand narratives of its revolutionary, rural and collective past. It also showcases China reinventing an urban, de-centered, privatized everyday life. In the post-colonial, post-Cold-War world of today, tension between China’s older ways of life and the globally transmitted lifestyles has replaced overt ideological warfare in the international arena. In today’s China, pirated lifestyles boom with pirated DVDs and the advance of McWorld. The Chinese government’s harsh oppression of ideological dissidents and leniency toward the market logic imported from the West assisted this boom.

Keywords

xiaozi (小資 petty bourgeois), *xiaozi* literature, *Shanghai Baby* (上海寶貝), Wei Hui (衛慧), lifestyles, everydayness, body, emotions, McWorld

Shanghai Baby presents both a typical and a not-so-typical scenario in international politics that concerns the reception of Chinese literary works and films in the West. Set in *fin-de-siècle* Shanghai, the novel is supposedly a semi-autobiographical account of Wei Hui, a “late-born generation”¹ writer who gave rise to a trend of sensuality by writing experimental novels with “body and heart.” Here, heart is definitely not, as thought by ancient Chinese, an organ for thinking² but one for experiencing sensuality; it is part of the body in the body/mind dichotomy. Some current writers like to distinguish their changed style in writing as “writing with the body” (身體寫作 *shenti xiezu*).³

The first-person narrator of Wei Hui’s novel is Coco, a 25-year-old writer. Frank about her desire for both emotional and sexual satisfaction, Coco becomes involved with two very different men. Tiantian, her live-in boyfriend, is a sensual but fragile artist who is obsessed with the idea of death. He arouses in Coco an awareness of life and the importance of love. This awareness, plus the impotence of Tiantian, drives Coco into a fierce and passionate affair with Mark, a sexually charged German working in China temporarily. Strong and assertive, Mark offers Coco sexual gratification, though he is not the soul mate that Tiantian is. Juggling two lovers while writing her first novel, Coco also has to juggle the traditional expectations of her parents and her exposure to the experimental nature of the lives of her circle of friends—a wealthy former prostitute, a computer hacker, a bisexual fashion stylist, an avant-garde filmmaker, and others who are drug addicts and artists. Coco confides to her readers her confusions, frustrations, ecstasies, sense of joy and guilt as she experiments in life with her body and heart.

Here is the typical part of the scenario: the book is banned in China but its English translation has become popular in Western countries. The same has happened to many Chinese films in the post-Mao era. Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lanterns* (1991) are two earlier examples. Both films won awards overseas but were banned in China. More recently, many independently

¹ Young writers emerged since the turn of the centuries are often referred to as a *xin sheng* (新生 new-born) or a *wan sheng* (晚生 late-born) generation. They are the contemporaries of the young, post-fifth-Generation film directors. These writers and directors, for the differences they make, are interchangeably described as “self-centered,” “marginal,” “alienated,” “embittered,” “decadent,” “nihilistic,” “carnal,” “vulgar,” and so on.

² Many mind-characters, such as *si* (思 to think) and *wang* (忘 to forget), fall into the heart category that indicates this ancient belief.

³ “To write with the body” has become such a vogue that it becomes a primary target of satire in the novel *Women and Bed* by Jiu Dan (九丹), who herself is a prominent writer in this trend. The satire is juxtaposed with a big joke on Derrida: *Women and Bed*, in a way, is a parody of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and could well be titled *Waiting for Derrida*.

produced films, those by Jia Zhangke (賈樟柯), Li Yang (李揚), and Wang Chao (王超), for example, have won international acclaim but have no chance of being screened in China. Like the Olympic Games, the international film festivals draw attention to national identities, as is the case with these films. International politics, especially the residue of Cold War confrontation,⁴ are clearly evident in this typical scenario of banning (in China) and acclaim (in the West).

One writer's response to an independent film illustrates some issues involved in this scenario. In the early summer of 2002, Zhang Xinxin (張辛欣), a Chinese writer who had migrated to the United States, was visiting Paris. At a party, she heard all her French friends talking about a Chinese film that had opened in Paris after participating in the Cannes Film Festival. She invited her host family in Paris, a senior couple, to watch the film with her but felt sorry afterwards that she had done so. The film was not a pleasant one. The couple was impressed and thought that they needed to update their understanding of China. Zhang Xinxin, however, felt that they were not being given the right picture of today's China and that they did not understand the politics that had affected the French opening of this film.

The film was *The Orphan of Anyang* (安陽嬰兒 Anyang yinger), an independently produced film by Wang Chao. In a style of raw realism, it tells the story of an unemployed state worker and a prostitute in the provincial town of Anyang. Zhang Xinxin was moved enough by her Paris experience with the film to publish an article in China about it. Among the issues raised in "To Make It Not in the East but in the West?" the relationship between reality and international politics concerns us here. Zhang does not deny the validity of the everyday life shown in the film—the unemployment, the prostitution, the shabby streets, the cheap restaurants, and the old apartment buildings. "You also face this kind of reality," Zhang asks herself in the article. "Why can't you make a film like this?" (64). Her first answer is the disgust she feels with the many young Chinese film directors who are catering to Western expectations of what China should be like. Although she does not specify what this expectation is, we can assume that it is one concerning the residue of Cold-War confrontation—the darker side of Chinese life can always be used to prove that China needs to shed more of its Communist past and to be more open to the free world of the West. In this sense, Zhang accuses the directors of *The Orphan of Anyang* and similar films of exposé, such as the internationally acclaimed

⁴ The cold war refers to the ideological, political, and economic tensions since the Second World War between the former socialist camp nations against the United States and Western Europe. The diminution of the socialist camp, symbolized by the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989, led to the end of the cold war. The influence, or the residue, of decades of confrontation, however, will not go away immediately.

features by Jia Zhangke, of begging for Western favors and funding. Zhang's answer also seems to reflect her sensitivity to the Chinese national identity. She is disgusted that such films as *The Orphan of Anyang* depict China as "dirty, chaotic, and backward" (髒、亂、差 zang, luan, cha): "The poor people [in China]," Zhang protests, referring to a fairy tale by Danish writer Hans Andersen, "actually have their clothes on" (64).

What is typical in Zhang's response to *The Orphan of Anyang* is the recurrence of familiar ways of thinking: the consciousness of international politics, the arousal of national sensitivity concerning the representation of China in the international arena, and the disgust felt by some that certain artists have not presented the right picture of China. Years before, Zhang Yimou's "red films" were known for causing a "black anger" (黑色義憤 heise yifen) in China—the films were criticized for being a fabrication of Chinese history and culture, and they were believed to be specially packaged to cater to foreigners (Wang 69). In this cinematic use of nationalism in international politics, the difference between China and the West is usually a point of departure for discomfort, accusation, or banning on one side and appreciation, acclaim, or award-giving on the other. This difference is crucial in any reflecting of the residue of the Cold-War confrontation.

This leads us to the atypical part of the *Shanghai Baby* scenario. Unlike many of the independent films, which gained publicity in the West first and then were circulated in China through pirated video copies among a limited audience, the novel *Shanghai Baby* was first published in China, became very popular among young Chinese readers, was translated and circulated abroad, and then got banned in China. In addition, the daily life presented in this book strikes the Western reader not as different from but as similar to life in the West. This similarity confuses many. "The American culture worship took me by surprise," reviewer J. Stefan-Cole admitted. In fact, Stefan-Cole couldn't help but wonder: "Where was the infamous Communist oppression? Where all the post-Tiananmen Square terror in these partygoers, drug users, and night-life hounds?" This reviewer believes that "Coco's crowd could be the East Village of a couple of years ago, or London's West End, even pockets of Williamsburg."

The residue of the Cold-War confrontation, it appears, is hard to find in a reading of this book. The discovery is instead that Chinese urban youth culture is almost the same as that in the West. "American readers," another reviewer Sarah Egelman cautioned about reading *Shanghai Baby*, "may be disappointed to find that what is scandalous in China is more commonplace in Western literature."

Unfortunately, the resemblance between the lifestyle in *Shanghai Baby* and that of the West will also keep appreciation of this book in the West at bay. “Wei Hui may be a fresh new voice in China,” Kenneth Campeon wrote, “but to an American accustomed to women as liberated and aggressive as they are insecure and alone, her voice is staler than the air in Shanghai.” An even more unsympathetic critic, who did not consider the book’s Chinese context but thought only of its Western function, called it a “raunchy little novel,” “a brazenly sexual book tailored to meet to bestsellers’ requirements or as a bait to lure testosterone-fueled Caucasian men to China in hopes of fulfilling their Lucy Liu fantasies” (n1kki).

These novel-bashings were done not by ignoring the novel’s literary quality. Some reviewers praised the novel as “poetic,” “sensual,” and “subtly spiritual” (Egelman), compared Wei Hui’s “plain spoken style” with Japanese writer Banana Yoshimoto (Stefan-Cole), matched Wei Hui to Henry Miller for “an ecstatic I-am-on-fire fluency” (Champeon), and found Henri Matisse’s artistic standard in Wei Hui’s style: “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter” (Champeon). In the age of globalization, it appears, literary qualities alone usually wouldn’t carry the appreciation for a text circulated internationally far enough. Cultural studies, in the case of *Shanghai Baby*, will once again prove to be an indispensable channel for an informed appreciation of the sensuous and aesthetic functions of a literary work.

Shanghai Baby was not meant for the Western readers in the first place but was an indication that the distance between East and West had been drastically shortened in certain areas of life. The cultural context that produced the novel, which is not readily available to Western readers, turns out to be crucial for a proper understanding and appreciation of it. Although the book showcases a China that may not appear to be so different from the West, the cultural change that it illustrates is actually as shocking as what occurs in many films of exposé that showcase the “original face” of China.⁵ How drastically the Chinese younger generations have changed, and how they are in search of their freedom informed by the globally transmitted Western lifestyles, add new perspectives through which people should understand the residue of the Cold-War confrontation and read certain texts accordingly.

Shanghai Baby is not an accidental book. In the West, its popularity has been rivaled by the equally decadent stories of Mian Mian (棉棉), another woman writer

⁵ In his interview with Stephen Teo, film director Jia Zhangke indicates that his hometown, a medium-sized industrial city in China’s heartland, acts as a microcosm of China itself. It shows the “original face” of China. See Teo.

from Shanghai. Both in their 20s, Wei Hui and Mian Mian have caught the attention of Western readers as China's "bad girls of letters" ("The Pen Is Nastier"). The two writers, however, are only part of a fashionable trend in today's urban youth subculture in China. It is really the tip of an iceberg—the tip is two female writers and their books in print, and the iceberg is the abundance of similar writings circulating on the Internet. With less control and censorship, a large and highly participatory young readership, and no need for publishing editors, cyber fiction in the style of Wei Hui and Mian Mian has been proliferating. In 2002, a two-volume anthology of this literature—*Fense de biaoqing* (粉色的表情 Pink expressions) and *Ganshang de landiao* (感傷的藍調 Sentimental blue tones)—was edited by Ge Hongbing (葛紅兵), a new-generation literary scholar. The anthology, which includes texts of ten female writers all born after the 1970s, offers a more extensive look at the subculture from which emerged Wei Hui, Mian Mian, their shock sisters, and their lifestyle.

The anthology chooses to refer to the group of writers, their texts, and their lifestyle as *xiaozi*. According to Zhizhu Yi (蜘蛛一), a critic in the anthology, *xiaozi* has almost become a synonym for today's urban lifestyle of the young. "Xiaozi," as Zhizhu Yi elaborates, "was not created by God, nor produced by Nüwa [女媧]. Xiaozi's mother is the metropolis [...]. Xiaozi is not a social stratum. It is a lifestyle, a *cultural* taste, a manner of living, and a standard" (50; emphasis mine).⁶ Obviously, the critic is re-defining the term; *xiaozi* was indeed created neither by the Western supreme God nor by the Chinese legendary human creator Nüwa but it has long been a Marxist term of social and cultural analysis used both in the West and in China. In China's recent past, before the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao defined *xiaozi* as a social stratum including students, teachers, and all the low-ranking clerks, attorneys, government or company employees, and minor merchants. *Xiaozi* was seen as the in-between social stratum caught in the class struggle between the rich and poor. All the mental expressions related to or symbolic of this in-betweenness, such as wavering, hesitance, ambivalence, self-pity, sentimentality, and so on, were also often labeled as *xiaozi*. After the PRC was founded, in the Mao era, *xiaozi* remained a derogatory term as the Party imposed class struggle ideology throughout the nation.

The Web-based anthology has transplanted the term *xiaozi* from China's revolutionary past to its depoliticizing present, from a countryside culture (denoting a

⁶ Zhizhu Yi, the critic's name, is obviously a mischievous pen name (and the Internet login name), meaning Spider #1. Nüwa is the legendary Chinese goddess who is believed to have created human beings.

collective spirit) to an urban culture (suggesting fragmentation and the pursuit of individuality), and from a government-engineered grand narrative that monopolizes the mind of the nation to a privatization of beliefs. This transplanting especially draws our attention to a nationwide interest in everyday life, shown in the transition from Mao's socialist *holy* everydayness to the post-Mao *secularized* one. *Holy* and *secular*, terms borrowed from Western intellectual history, suggest how China's post-Mao re-conception of everydayness strikingly resembles a social and cultural process in Western intellectual history. *Depoliticization*, *privatization*, and *pluralism* were key words for Western secularization. The separation of state and religion during the sixteenth-century Reformation was to undermine the spirit of obedience to any clerical authority so that pluralism might flourish again. Secularization involved a de-centered privatization of faiths or the individual access to beliefs.

The post-Mao interest in everyday life also features depoliticization. It aimed at separating the state monopoly of upholding the holy status of the everyday and a privatized, de-centered re-creation of the everyday. Maoist cultural production of the everyday, in its representational blend of "realism plus romanticism," refuted trivial deviations from the glorious revolutionary goals, curbed distracting heterogeneity for collective actions, and ignored uninteresting profanity for inspiring ideals. "A collective desire to resist the inertia of everyday life," as Tang Xiaobing observed, "was an integral part of the grand socialist movement in modern China" (279). Examining peasant paintings, Tang noticed such utopian features as completeness and transcendence, an aesthetic of scale but not detail, a panoramic perspective, a stylization of socialist ideals, and homogeneity. This Maoist effort to overcome the anxiety of everyday life, Tang commented, was "often at the cost of impoverishing it" (280-84). The case of peasant painting is most appropriate here because Maoist China, with its anti-urban development, was a sum of villages, rural and urban. The conventional urban spirit associated with diversity, individuality, and impersonality was greatly discouraged.

The transplanted *xiaozi*, in contrast, claims the metropolis as mother. *Xiaozi*'s refashioning of everyday life reflects the same deviation from the grand narrative of the Maoist revolutionary ideology. Relating to the collapse of a "red" China, editor Ge Hongbing assigns light colors—pink (suggesting warmth and gentility), light green (symbolizing love for nature and human beings), and light blue (implying such qualities as quiet, elegance, and taste)—as the symbolic colors of *xiaozi*. He argues that the light-colored *xiaozi* taste of life has contributed to the social stability of the most recent Chinese history. He elevates *xiaozi* from its status as a subculture confined to educated, white-collar urban youth to the prevailing feature of today's

urban life—materialistic, everyday, and profane. “The spiritual essence of our era,” Ge writes, “is becoming more and more *xiaozi*. The materialist glory of *xiaozi* culture presents concretely a spiritual void that is close to ‘nothingness’ (無 *wu*) and that has a façade of everydayness” (*Pink Expressions* ii; *Sentimental Blue Tones* ii).

Ge’s description of the market dominance of *xiaozi* culture—how the capitalist market influence has eliminated the individuality, uniqueness, and depth of the culture—may have reflected his not-so-optimistic view of urban culture. This view is reminiscent of the warning of sociologists from the early-twentieth-century German School, such as Oswald Spengler, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, about the colder aspects of urbanization such as bureaucracy, fragmentation, and isolation.⁷ The view, however, is only fleeting. The contemporary Chinese mind, as Ge’s writing indicates, does not want to think much about the negative social effects of *xiaozi* culture but wants to live it first. To put it another way, the contemporary Chinese mind is actually at the mercy of the body and its desires. A common accusation of Wei Hui and her shock sisters in China is that their bodies control them. Wang Shuo (王朔), for example, has characterized Mian Mian as someone who “writes with her body, not her brain” (qtd. in Goldblatt).⁸ Rebels as they are, the old-time bad boys of Beijing and today’s Shanghai shock sisters seem to have a major difference as in the dichotomy of the body and the mind. The cover of Wei Hui’s *Shanghai Baby* clearly proclaims it as “a novel of body-and-heart-felt experiences.” Here, the body (sexuality, emotions, sensuality and ecstasy) has become a market strategy for increasing sales. The packaging is all about the body and the heart. The mind has no room in it. Deep down, the status of a woman writer like Wei Hui, now known along with her shock sisters as “pretty-woman writers” (美女作家 *meinü zuojia*), is well aligned with voyeurism of the readers and women as the object of desire.⁹ With the mind ousted, *xiaozi* literature clearly lacks depth. “The book,” one reviewer commented on *Shanghai Baby*, “is as alluring as a gossip column, but, alas, as shallow as one, too” (Amazon.com).

The body is the *xiaozi*’s bridge to everydayness. *Xiaozi* is not much about thinking; instead, it emphasizes emotions and sensuality. This emphasis spells out a changing emotional culture that is clearly related to China’s transition from its holy

⁷ See Sennett for a concise introduction and the essential writings of the German School of urban studies.

⁸ Goldblatt is a professor of Chinese at the University of Colorado at Boulder. A prolific translator, his recent translations include Wang Shuo’s novel *Please Don’t Call Me Human*.

⁹ One of Wei Hui’s more recent novels, *Be Nude Like This* (就這樣一絲不掛 *Jiu zheyang yisibugua*), has not only a nude woman’s body printed on the cover but also such a line to boost sales: “A novel that 100% of men love to read.”

past to its secular present. Emotion has been enjoying a change in its status in the Western mind. Traditionally, the rational, scientific Western mind tended to ignore emotions and emotionality, associating them with irrationality and the flesh. But since the mid-twentieth century, as psychologists Kurt W. Fischer and June Price Tangney remarked in 1995, “there has been a revolution in the study of emotion” (3). Hundreds of studies on the topic of emotion have emerged in the social sciences and humanities, documenting a drastically changed perception of emotions.¹⁰ “Emotions,” as Candace Clark puts it, “underlie all human experience and social life, shaping all subjectivity, intersubjectivity, everyday interaction, social exchange, social bonds, and social divisions” (155). Emotion has moved from the margin of the culture to the center of rekindled academic attention.

If the Western mind tends to approach the subject of emotion in a binary of rationality versus irrationality, the traditional Chinese approach is the cultivation, or sublimation, of emotions. The well-known Confucian tenet that human actions are “initiated by emotions but curtailed by rituals” (發乎於情止乎於禮 *fahu yu qing, zhihu yu li*) best explains this approach. Recognizing emotions as indispensable parts of human nature, the traditional Chinese emotional culture institutionalized a wide spectrum of feelings, especially those associated with maintaining the civic order of a society, in the standard of decorum. The uninstitutionalized feelings, such as romantic love (love not arranged by families), often had to find expressions in the less respected, marginalized genres of art and literature, such as ghost stories or opera. The emotional culture of Maoist China, reflecting its utopian ideology and the grand narrative of social revolution, also presents its own spectrum of institutionalized feelings. Given the totalitarian nature of the regime, and the fact that it delivered its political agenda by mass campaigns that touched the everyday lives of people through grassroots efforts, the Maoist emotional culture was most profoundly regulated, leaving very little room for uninstitutionalized, private emotions to survive. The interest in exploring these uninstitutionalized feelings in post-Mao China reflects, among other things, a desire for enrichment and a wish to free human beings from the institutionalized yoke. The desire and the wish, nonetheless, cannot function in a void but need to be fed. McWorld as such arrives at the right time.

Xiaozi life is depicted as the acceptance of the “spiritual void” of everyday pleasure—an emotional diving into the sensuality of daily life. The popularity of *Shanghai Baby* and similar literature can be explained by the fact that they resonate

¹⁰ William M. Reddy, in his book *The Navigation of Feeling*, documents many major studies in the above-mentioned “revolution in the study of emotion.”

with throngs of urban youth who are turning toward the same horizon. Compared with the youth of Maoist and immediate post-Mao China, today's young people are depoliticized, down-to-earth, and profane. They don't bother to be heroes, they don't talk about missions and goals of life, and they don't care about personal sacrifice for the sake of the State. The Chinese younger generations today are finally distant enough from the country's revolutionary past to allow *xiaozi* tastes and lifestyles to win through. Ge's anthology clearly endorses *xiaozi* life. "In the new century," he writes,

xiaozi is no longer just confined to the literary interest of the intellectuals who have bourgeois tastes. *Xiaozi* is no longer just found in the words flowing in fashionable *xiaozi* journals but is found everywhere on city streets. *Xiaozi* sings in the hearts of the young. It has become a popular tendency of life, a mass movement of life. (*Pink Expressions* i; *Sentimental Blue Tones* i)

The emergence of *xiaozi* on a massive scale is not only the fading away of a red culture into the lighter-color subcultures, that is, changes perceived from China's internal politics. It is also the showcasing of a globally transmitted cluster of lifestyles. David Chaney described this as a change from "ways of life" to "lifestyles," which narrows the distance between the West and the East. *A way of life*, as seen by Chaney, is typically associated with pre-modern Apollonian society in a particular geographical locale. Its social significance ties more to ownership and organization of means of production. It is displayed in features such as shared norms, rituals, and patterns of social orders. It is based on the production and reproduction of stable institutions. *A way of life* describes Maoist China, which, for a long time, maintained an anti-urban spirit. *Lifestyles*, in contrast, can only prevail in an era of modernity or even late-modernity. They are forms of social status derived from mass access to consumption and leisure. They are often as widespread as the global market and the distributive networks of communication and entertainment. Whereas Western lifestyles have long prevailed in many developing countries, post-Mao China has only recently opened up to the flow of not only material commodities but also lifestyles. In this sense, the winning through of *xiaozi* tastes is part and parcel of China's exposure to market-distributed international lifestyles. "*Shanghai Baby* is set in Shanghai," Champeon wrote:

True, but it could almost be set anywhere, as cities all over the world grow increasingly alike, and as Nikki [a different translation of the name of the narrator character of *Shanghai Baby*] cruises around in a VW and describes that House and Hip Hop music are “totally cool.” If you need any evidence that the East-West dichotomy is outdated, this novel may be it.

In the globalized, post-colonial, post-Cold-War world of today, *ways of life* and *lifestyles* co-exist and interact in an inescapable dialectic. Their tension and conflicts have replaced the old overt ideological warfare among different political regimes to occupy center stage. Benjamin Barber best describes this dialectic in his book *Jihad vs. McWorld*. In this book, Jihad (an Islamic zeal denoting religious struggle on behalf of faith) is used as a generalized name for all kinds of localized cultural forces “in the name of a hundred narrowly conceived faiths against every kind of interdependence, every kind of artificial social cooperation and mutuality” (4). These are the old ways of life. By contrast, McWorld denotes lifestyles. In Barber’s excellent description, “McWorld is a product of popular culture driven by expansionist commerce. Its template is America, its form style. Its goods are as much images as material, and aesthetic as well as product line. It is about culture as commodity, apparel as ideology” (17).

In the early twentieth century, when the Chinese youth tried to modernize Chinese culture, they had their eyes on two virtues seen in Western achievements. The Chinese May Fourth new cultural movement of 1919 proclaimed its invitation of Mr. S(cience) and Mr. D(emocracy). While Mr. S has made relatively easier inroads in China, Mr. D has not. Between the May Fourth student parade in Tiananmen Square and the 1989 post-Mao student parade in the same square 70 years later—both pro-democracy and both crushed by military power—nearly a century of Chinese modern history has shown a strong political resistance to democracy.

In the post-1989 “depoliticized” economic boom, Western influence has changed its form. The Chinese government today continues to encourage the pragmatic culture that marked Deng-era economic reform. The government’s harsh oppression of ideological dissidents formed a contrast to its leniency around the gap between rich and poor in society. The bargain that Deng Xiaoping offered in his reform era and which the post-Tiananmen-Square-massacre-era regime learned to appreciate, as Perry Link describes, was “Shut up and I’ll let you get rich” (31). In a profane culture that encourages its members to care more about getting rich and less

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about the political status of the communities and the nation, many have become aloof to democracy but are still exposed to the lifestyles of the McWorld. As Barber describes the China of today,

While the struggle against democracy has so far succeeded, the struggle against lifestyle and culture is failing, precisely because the economy's "own logic" is the logic of McWorld and seems far more likely to bring with it the vices of the West (its cultural imagery and the ideology of consumption as well as a "logical" tolerance for social injustice and inequality) than its virtues (democracy and human rights). (186)

The popularity of *Shanghai Baby* and its banning and burning (40,000 copies were reported burned when the book was banned in 2001) indicates that the Chinese government is indeed losing the war in curbing the infiltration of the Western lifestyle.

The biggest impact of the West in China today is the McWorld described by Barber—the commercial culture, ideology, and lifestyle embodied by the material and cultural products of the West. If one considers not only the government-sponsored, limited import of Hollywood films to China but also the flourishing Chinese market in pirated DVDs of foreign films, one realizes how completely foreign lifestyles, especially those showcased through Hollywood films, are penetrating Chinese everyday life. Zhang Yiwu (張頤武), a cultural studies scholar in China, describes today's Chinese youth as "a disc-watching generation" (看碟的一代 *kan die de yidai*). A 2004 film by He Jianjun (何建軍), *Pirated Copy* (蔓延 *Manyan*), best illustrates how the most prosperous, street-side markets of pirated disks of foreign films are penetrating Chinese everyday life. Just as Wei Hui's fictional characters navigate their everyday lives guided by quotes from American popular culture (from Henry Miller to Allen Ginsberg), the characters in He Jianjun's film envision striking moments from their favorite movies in the things they do—their lives, in a way, are turned into pirated copies of the West through the billions of disks that one can purchase around many corners of Chinese streets. Here, we find one more clue to the contrast of old-time bad boys of Beijing and today's shock sisters of Shanghai. Wang Shuo's popularity, which originated from seeking fun by targeting China's political ideology, has lost its appeal among today's younger generations, who are aloof to traditional political ideology. Instead, they are spellbound by what Barber terms "videology," a global hegemony of the

McWorld that works through sound bites, film clips, cyber spaces, fashion trends, and lifestyles (17). Among the young, Wang Shuo is out and the shock sisters are in. The young have become subscribers to the globally transmitted “videology.”

The *xiaozi* writers are not particularly happy about their life. Reading the critics in Ge’s anthology, one can easily detect a shared disgust of these critics for *xiaozi*’s bad taste, the submission to market demands, the materialism, narcissism, vanity, and hybridism in cultural orientation (post-colonial influences of the West, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). According to the editor, all the critics anthologized are about the same age as the *xiaozi* writers and have the same insider’s knowledge of this lifestyle. Their criticism itself is an elaboration of the self-consciousness of the *xiaozi* writers. The same self-consciousness shows up in *Shanghai Baby*; its heroine comments on post-colonialism in today’s Shanghai, while making her foreign-inspired sensual life and her love affair with a foreigner a post-colonial spectacle. *Shanghai Baby*’s depiction of the *xiaozi* lifestyle, while playfully informative, also contains a self-consciousness of decadence and employs derogatory diction:

My friend and I, a tribe of the sons and daughters of the well-to-do, often used exaggerated and outré language to manufacture life-threatening pleasure. A swarm of affectionate, mutually dependent little fireflies, we devoured the wings of imagination and had little contact with reality. We were maggots feeding on the city’s bones, but utterly sexy ones. The city’s bizarre romanticism and genuine sense of poetry were actually created by our tribe. Some call us *linglei*; others damn us as trash; some yearn to join us, and imitate us in every way they can, from clothes and hairstyle to speech and sex; others swear at us and tell us to take our dog fart lifestyles and disappear. (235)¹¹

Shanghai Baby is a spectacle, showing the advance of the McWorld in China, and indicating how a market-transmitted lifestyle is mounting the center stage. In Wei Hui’s words: the novel is set in a city “where China and the West met intimately and evolved together.” It is urbanely profane, filled with “the vulgar, sentimental, and mysterious atmosphere” found in Shanghai’s streets and alleys (*Shanghai Baby* 25). It is not written on paper but “tattooed on [the writer’s] pale skin.” Competing with Allen Ginsberg’s sharing of words and pot with his fans, it is about the “lyrical joy brought on by alcohol, innocence, and love” (*Shanghai Baby*

¹¹ *Linglei* (另類), which the translator chooses not to translate, literally means “the other kind,” or “the other species.” The phrase is often used derogatively.

41). The confusion and anxiety found in this spectacle is not just about being young or about being bored by the Chinese cultural *status quo*, but is also about the tensions *xiaozi* is experiencing in their double in-betweenness—they are not only caught between China's internal politics inscribed in the contrast of China's past and present but also caught between the international politics characterized by a contrast of older ways of life and the new lifestyles (after all, *xiaozi* was defined as the in-between social stratum in the first place). The spectacle is clearly hybrid in nature and its impact on China is far-reaching. The spectacle illustrates a coincidence of timing: a Chinese cultural desire to break away from the country's revolutionary past materialized at the same time when McWorld knocked down the Great Wall of China.

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