Introduction

Shanghai and Chinese Modernity

IT WAS HARDLY LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT. The first time I set eyes on Shanghai, in October 1957, I had arrived from Beijing, where, perched on an official rostrum, I had attended the National Festival celebrations in Tian'anmen Square. Compared to Beijing, Shanghai struck me as provincial. I immediately viewed this former bastion of imperialism with a distrustful eye. I was indignant at the sight of the shantytowns, preserved in their original state to perpetuate the memory of the abject conditions to which workers had been subjected before the revolution, while I admired the gray apartment blocks built in the suburbs to rehouse some of them. I saw what people chose to show me, never realizing that an "Anti-Rightist" campaign was busy dispatching hundreds of thousands of Shanghainese to the gulags. I was the perfect "goldfish traveler," confined to its bowl.[1]

The first crack in that bowl was caused by the unease that I felt in the large hotel to which I had been assigned. From its luxurious past it had retained its huge suites of rooms, its dented silverware, and its well-trained staff. The white-suited "boy" moving about silently and speaking softly in singsong French, who was in charge of the floor where I was the sole occupant, resembled a ghost. Even more ghostlike was an elderly English couple that I passed one evening on the stairs, he clad in suit and tie, she with a permanent-waved blonde coiffure. These incongruous figures conjured up a faint vision of the vanished metropolis now masked by the austere Communist city. It was now almost ten years since Shanghai had been swept along in the Communist revolution, leaving many of its former residents and visitors with nostalgic memories. I myself had no associations with that past, but I felt a spark of curiosity and already a stirring of fascination about this city that had been engulfed by the storms of history.

During my brief stay in Shanghai, I visited the building sites, schools, and crèches of the new China. Once back in France, I immersed myself in the town's history, which, at that time, was confined to that of its

foreign concessions: the international settlement, with its trading companies, banks, naval yards, and factories that had turned Shanghai into a world metropolis; and the French concession, the international settlement's younger sister, whose shady streets, fashion houses, literary bohemia, and militant revolutionaries had caused the town to be known as "the Paris of the East." Later, as my research probed deeper, I began to appreciate the degree to which Shanghai had all along been above all a Chinese town. The old concessions teemed with Chinese inhabitants, and no business project could go ahead without their cooperation or assent. The originality of the town and the attraction that it exerted lay not in the implantation of a colonial modernity, many other examples of which were provided by Asia and Africa, but rather in the welcome that its local society had given to that implantation, adopting and adapting it, and turning it into a modernity that was Chinese.

In the 1960s, the concept of modernization prompted only distrust. It chimed all too well with westernization and, it was said, served simply as a sorry excuse for imperialism. The few specialists who took an interest in the history of Shanghai laid the emphasis on the phenomenon of foreign domination: the town was no more than a foreign enclave, a thorn in China's side.[2] Nowadays Shanghai modernity is no longer contested, but specialists try to present it as the consequence of an autochthonous evolution that preceded the arrival of the Westerners by several centuries.[3] Chinese nationalism and culturalist history are well satisfied with this new interpretation. However, the role that foreigners played in the rise of Shanghai is no easier to obscure than that the Chinese played. The interaction, cooperation, and rivalry between the two groups turned Shanghai into the capital of "another" China, one that was cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial.[4] Within an empire dominated by a long rural and bureaucratic tradition, Shanghai thus became the model of a modernity founded upon Western contributions but adapted to the national Chinese culture.

Contrary to the long-standing belief of Westerners, in the mid-nineteenth century Shanghai had not been a wretched fishing village just waiting for foreign intervention to wave a magic wand and transform it into a major economic and financial center. With a population of around 200,000 inhabitants, it was a relatively important administrative center, an

active regional market town, and a seaport thronged by junks that sailed up and down the coastline and even all the way to Japan. In the thriving region of the lower Yangzi, it was, however, eclipsed by many richer, more dynamic, and more highly cultured towns.

Shanghai's destiny was sealed in 1842, when the treaty of Nanjing designated it one of the five Chinese ports to be opened up to Western trade. Until that date, the Chinese Empire had refused to enter into any economic or political relations with the West, and it was only in consequence of the First Opium War (1839–1842) that it had been forced to relent. The British had waged this Opium War. What was immediately at stake was the importation of opium, which the imperial authorities wished to prohibit but foreign merchants continued to pursue, since the drug represented for them the major commodity that they could exchange for tea and silk. More generally, though, the Europeans' objective was to force the Empire of the Middle Kingdom to agree to the establishment of regular relations with themselves. Among the ports that were "opened up" in this way, Shanghai rapidly affirmed its preeminence, not so much because of its really quite mediocre situation as a river port on the Huangpu (a tributary of the Yangzi that flowed into the estuary of the latter), but thanks to its position at the mouth of this great river that served a huge surrounding basin right at the center of China. Within a few decades, Shanghai became the preferred place of residence for the foreign entrepreneurs who, with the aid of Chinese merchants, set up their businesses there. Thanks to the privileges granted by the treaties and the autonomy that the concessions thus acquired, the foreign residents, together with the Chinese who now settled alongside them, found themselves protected from the troubles that beset the decline of the last imperial dynasty and the fraught birth of the Republican regime after the 1911 Revolution.

As the country's chief center for international commerce and an islet of relative safety in a deeply troubled China, Shanghai provided many opportunities for intercultural contacts between merchants whose chief concerns were their material interests. The Jesuits' arrival in the Beijing Court at the beginning of the seventeenth century had prompted a highly intellectual dialogue between the mandarins and the missionaries; three centuries later, the establishment of European and American entrepreneurs

in Shanghai gave rise to interchanges that focused essentially upon commercial practices, financial techniques, and production processes. Shanghai had never been a great center of intellectual influences. The meeting of Chinese civilization and Western modernity took a pragmatic form. The local society's reception of foreign novelties and the foreigners' adaptation to their new place of work and living conditions progressed more smoothly than might have been expected given that, on both sides, the interested parties were not particularly highly educated individuals but merchants and adventurers eager to justify their ventures by whatever profit possible. The adaptability and flexibility of these men injected an extraordinary dynamism into Shanghai society. Positioned on the margins of the Chinese Empire and at the antipodes of the Western world, this was a society of pioneers. The lawlessness that reigned within it was tempered to varying degrees by the way in which the various groups organized their respective communities—merchants or vagrants, Chinese or foreign—and also by interventions on the part of the Beijing government and the governments of the imperialist powers involved.

However, those interventions were by no means symmetrically balanced, as the position of the Chinese authorities was far weaker than that of the Western powers. The disproportion of the forces involved definitely favored the foreign merchants, supported, as they were, by their consuls and their gunboats, rather than the Chinese merchants, who were not so much supported but exploited by the declining imperial power and were then, following the 1911 Revolution, abandoned to their own devices by the Republican regime that was struggling to establish itself. However, actually there, on the spot, the privileges extorted by diplomatic and military pressure were not invariably translated into economic advantages. The relations between the foreign and Chinese communities were by no means always weighted in favor of the former, as claimed by nationalist Chinese historiography and suggested by our own guilty consciences as former imperialists.

Shanghai and its surrounding region, the rich Yangzi delta, constituted a long-standing commercial civilization, crisscrossed by a very dense network of communicating river routes, market trading, and channels of finance controlled by extremely well-organized guilds. In order to develop

relations with the Chinese interior, where they were for a long time not permitted to establish themselves, the foreigners were obliged to cooperate with these guilds and frequently had to accept their conditions. In the face of the trump cards that their European or American competitors held (tax exemptions, technological superiority, and so on), the Chinese made the most of their own familiarity with the local environment and the extreme cohesion of their professional organizations. Although the foreigners dominated relations between Shanghai and the Western markets, the Chinese still controlled the commercial circuits linking the treaty port with the inland provinces. The economy of Shanghai functioned because of the cooperation between the two groups, a negotiated cooperation from which stemmed advantages that were divided less unequally than has frequently been claimed.

On the other hand, the cultural exchanges implied by such cooperation were rather more uneven. The foreigners were regarded as models from whom the Chinese borrowed production techniques as well as economic, social, and political institutions. Such borrowing was, however, not the same as imitation pure and simple. Western practices came to be grafted onto traditional systems, modifying the way that these functioned and themselves being changed by this transplantation. The acculturation that accompanied such borrowings was rendered the more humiliating by the arrogance of the foreigners and the privileges they enjoyed. But in Shanghai, the customary xenophobia took the form of a modern nationalism that aimed to take up the Western challenge on its own terms: it aspired to economic modernization, material prosperity, and social progress. Shanghai, the most "foreign" of all Chinese towns, was also the one where nationalist awareness and the revolutionary mobilization of the masses first developed.

The myth of Shanghai evokes prostitution, drugs, and mafia activities. Yet the role that the town played in the definition of Chinese modernity was far more important. So in the first part of this book, "The Treaty Port," we shall see how the town itself became a pole of modernity. This evolution begins with the arrival and establishment of the foreigners (Chapter 1) and the creation in the concessions of a Sino-foreign society that was quasi autonomous, thanks to the disturbances that were at that time disrupting the

Chinese Empire (Chapter 2). The compradors, who constituted the crucial link in the cooperation between the Chinese and the foreign merchant communities, played a major role in the development of Shanghai capitalism during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth (Chapter 3). The men who made this development possible came from various provinces of China, from the principal nations of Europe, the United States, Japan, and other Asian countries already colonized by the West. The relative importance of these communities varied from one period to another, but the barriers that separated them—languages, customs, and interests—all contributed to the fragmentation of the local society (Chapter 4). The foreign presence polarized those divisions, superimposing on them the fundamental distinction between the Chinese and the non-Chinese, but to a certain extent transcending them by providing the model of concessions that most Chinese aspired to imitate, the better to compete with it (Chapter 5). Meanwhile, Shanghai presented itself as an example to the rest of China when, following the 1911 Revolution, it endeavored, despite many difficulties, to commit itself to the Republican way forward (Chapter 6).

The second part of this book, "The Metropolis," is devoted to the period between the two world wars, in the course of which the success of Shanghai reached its peak and the city extended its modernizing influence not only to other coastal regions but also, increasingly, to inland China. This was the golden age of Chinese capitalism (Chapter 7), at a time when mass movements, led by political parties (the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party) were fast developing. Both the manner of their organization and, in some cases, their managers or organizers, came from the West (Chapter 8). From 1927 onward, the effect of the growth of central power that resulted from Chiang Kai-shek's creation of the Nanjing government was to integrate Shanghai more closely into the political life of the nation. Shanghai now became the modern showcase of a regime that, however, was itself by no means modern (Chapter 9). These years of relative prosperity and order saw a flowering of popular culture, namely, *Haipai*, which significantly boosted both foreign influence and mercantile interests (Chapter 10).

In 1937, the Sino-Japanese War ushered in "the end of a world," as described in the third part of this book. Shanghai, occupied by the Japa-

nese armed forces, lost its international status, and its concessions reverted to the collaborating government of Wang Jingwei, a Chinese version of France's Vichy government. For the city of Shanghai, bruised, humiliated, and starving, this was a dark period (Chapter 11) to which the Japanese defeat and the 1945 liberation brought no more than brief relief. While Mao Zedong's peasant armies pursued their conquest of China, Shanghai, left to suffer inflation and the corruption and arbitrary whims of Guomindang officials, looked on passively as the Communist revolution triumphed (Chapter 12).

The history of "Shanghai under Communism," which is the subject of the last section of this book, is that of a city disliked by the Maoist regime, which never forgave it for its cosmopolitan past and rejected the modernity founded upon trade and individual initiative that it had exemplified for an entire century (Chapter 13). However, the policy of reform and openness that the Chinese regime has adopted from 1980 onward has allowed Shanghai to embark upon a renaissance (Chapter 14). With the government's plans for it to become once again a great economic and financial metropolis, maybe Shanghai will recover its destiny.