

BOOK REVIEW

SHANGHAI: The Rise and Fall of a Decadent City

By STELLA DONG

New York: William Morrow, 2000. 318 pages, \$27.50

Timothy Tung

Even after a half-century of Communist rule, Shanghai is still an exciting place, full of contradictions. A view of the greatly expanded metropolis from the top of the newly risen Jin Mou Building, which is proudly proclaimed the world's second-tallest edifice, gives an idea of what the city has achieved in the last decade. Shanghai today remains a paradox, where the privileged wine and dine in luxury eighty-six stories up while the poor struggle for a bowl of rice down below, not unlike the days Stella Dong describes in her book *Shanghai: The Rise and Fall of a Decadent City*. In this sense, Shanghai has not changed much, except that in contrast to the taipans, compradors, drug traffickers, and gangsters of the bygone era, today's privileged are the nouveaux riches and the politically connected.

Proclaimed by its publicist as "an elegant biography," the book covers the first hundred-plus years of China's largest city (1842-1949), up to the moment Mao's People's Liberation Army marched onto the famed Nanking Road. It recounts how an obscure fishing village on China's east coast was turned into a fabulous city, known as the Paris of the Orient. The transformation began 1842 with the invasion of victorious British gunboats after the ill-fated Opium War brought disgrace to the Ching (Qing) emperor. The signing of the Treaty of Nanking allowed foreign powers into the port, and from then on Western influence became inevitable. As the British, Americans, and French (and later the Japanese) began to settle in the specially designated areas later known as the International Settlement and the French Concession, they brought exotic vices as well as modern virtues. While the opium trade produced drug traffickers, racketeers, corrupt officials, murderers, and prostitutes, do-good Christian missionaries ushered in Western education and new ideas. In the author's words, Shanghai then took the form of "the emperor's ugly daughter . . . half Oriental, half Occidental." For a hundred years, the "ugly daughter" endured humiliation at the hands of foreigners, yet she also benefitted from the West and borrowed from it concepts of science and democracy, not to mention Marxism and other isms.

This "biography" of Shanghai is a miniature history of modern China, through which the author paints colorful portraits of men wielding great influence: fabulously rich foreigners such as Victor Sassoon and Silas Hardoon, and vicious Chinese gangsters such as Tu Yueh-sen and Huang Jin-rong. The author spares no details on social and political events such as the rise of Sun Yat-sen, the ascent of Chiang Kai-shek, the fortunes of the Soong sisters, the birth of



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the Chinese Communist Party, the Japanese invasion of the city, the puppet government that ruled during the war years, and, finally, the return of Nationalist government after the war. With her sure-handed grasp of the material, she presents Shanghai as a many-faceted city of opportunity and exploitation, of good and evil, of enlightenment and misery.

Shanghai was the land of the Green Gang and the White Terror, where drug-enriched gangsters collaborated with Chiang Kai-shek's secret police and the foreign-administered police to hunt down and massacre underground Communist Party workers. Shanghai was the haven of international refugees, where White Russians fleeing Stalin and Jews escaping from Hitler found shelter. Shanghai was the hub of vice as well as culture, where prostitutes and scholars existed side by side on notorious Foochow Road, known to old-timers as the Street of Brothels by night and the Street of Cultivation by day (when intellectuals and students frequented the many bookstores located in the area).

In its better days, Shanghai was the social, political, and cultural center of China, where universities sponsored by British, American, and French missionaries attracted the best and the brightest, where political revolutionaries sought foreign protection, where an urban press thrived and poets and artists converged. Shanghai attracted the ambitious and rewarded the talented. Merchants from Ningpo (Ningbo), Canton (Guangdong), Soochow (Suzhou), and Hangchow (Hangzhou), each with their own special capabilities, came to the city to seek their fortunes. They combined to produce a "Shanghai-type" sophisticate—the smart, savvy, arrogant Shanghainese that is still the norm today.

Stella Dong, a second-generation Chinese-American, has produced a credible, insightful, thoroughly researched historical record of the great city. Her Shanghai ought to be read side by side with another book of the same title (published in 1991) by Harriet Sergeant, which offers a British perspective. Like Ms. Dong, Ms. Sergeant did not let her lack of personal experience deter her from writing about a city which her father had lived in and loved. She did so by tracking down aged former British residents scattered across the globe, whose firsthand accounts make a fascinating companion to Dong's tales. As a former resident of Shanghai myself (born in Ningbo, I spent my formative years, from 1937 to 1947, in Shanghai before migrating to America), having lived there before 1949, I have two criticisms of the book. The first is that I wish Ms. Dong, in the chapter called "The Lonely Island," had included stories of the large group of journalists and writers stranded in Shanghai's foreign enclaves during the Sino-Japanese War, yearning for liberation. Up until Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, the International Settlement and the French Concession, surrounded on all sides by the Japanese since Japan's invasion in 1937, had provided protection for them. A special kind of literary writing was born, appearing chiefly in newspapers and magazine under British or American ownership, thus avoiding Japanese and the puppet government's ownership. Their work during this period later became an integral part of China's modern literature. Shanghai publishers are, at this moment, preparing a series of collected writings named "Literature of the Isolated

Island" to commemorate these brave writers, some of whom were kidnapped and tortured by the Japanese, and some of whom were assassinated. My other regret about the book is that while each chapter has a separate, extensive bibliography, no footnotes are given for any of the quotations and references. I find this most frustrating for an otherwise thorough, interesting book about a fascinating city.

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