



Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945 (Interpretations of Asia)

By Leo Ou-fan Lee

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In the midst of China's wild rush to modernize, a surprising note of reality arises: Shanghai, it seems, was once modern indeed, a pulsing center of commerce and art in the heart of the twentieth century. This book immerses us in the golden age of Shanghai urban culture, a modernity at once intrinsically Chinese and profoundly anomalous, blending new and indigenous ideas with those flooding into this "treaty port" from the Western world.

A preeminent specialist in Chinese studies, Leo Ou-fan Lee gives us a rare wide-angle view of Shanghai culture in the making. He shows us the architecture and urban spaces in which the new commercial culture flourished, then guides us through the publishing and filmmaking industries that nurtured a whole generation of artists and established a bold new style in urban life known as *modeng*. In the work of six writers of the time, particularly Shi Zhecun, Mu Shiying, and Eileen Chang, Lee discloses the reflection of Shanghai's urban landscape--foreign and familiar, oppressive and seductive, traditional and innovative. This work acquires a broader historical and cosmopolitan context with a look at the cultural links between Shanghai and Hong Kong, a virtual genealogy of Chinese modernity from the 1930s to the present day.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Lee is a distinguished professor of Chinese literature at Harvard University who has had a long association with the founders of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Being thus well versed in both Chinese and Western literature allows him to define Chinese modernity in Shanghai during the foreign occupation, when "culture" was at its height. Lee points out that China's adoption of Quaker Oats and cigarettes as nationalistic commodities was less important than the unprecedented use of the female body to advertise these products. Lee describes the surging modern atmosphere by examining the proliferation of cinemas, coffeehouses, theaters, dance halls, parks, and race courses. He also details the literary contributions of six writers to describe the popular demand for modern literature. Like Geremie R. Barm's *In the Red* (LJ 4/1/99), this book examines many different types of media in China, although Barm's focus is contemporary. Recommended particularly for libraries with collections in modern literature and Chinese studies. APeggy Spitzer Christoff, Oak Park, IL
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From [Booklist](#)

As a "treaty port," Shanghai has looked outward since the British forced this small trading town to accept foreign merchants in the nineteenth century. By 1930 the city had evolved into a cosmopolitan metropolis with a burgeoning economy (largely controlled by Westerners) and a glittering, eclectic cultural life. Lee, a professor of Chinese literature at Harvard, was born in a rural region of the mainland but raised in Taiwan. He has provided a fascinating portrait of the city during its so-called golden age, before the hostile ideology of Communism clamped down on the vibrant spirit of Shanghai. He examines a variety of cultural facets, including literature, architecture, cinema, and music. His insights into the relationship between "modern" Shanghai and the more traditional elements of "old China" are particularly interesting. This is a well-written and wide-ranging study of a great city that is reemerging as an economic and cultural giant. *Jay Freeman*

Review

This is cultural history from inside out and from ground up. Lee reads the semiotics of Shanghai modernism with a stunning sensibility that evokes a cosmopolitan past when city streets were scenes of poetry rather than protests and when urban experience redefined the meaning of femininity. A major statement towards a new cultural history of modern China. (Wen-hsin Yeh, University of California, Berkeley)

This is the definitive study of the making of modern Shanghai. Leo Lee has remapped Shanghai's cultural geography, marking out the intricate relations between city and coloniality in the 1930s. Admirably combining historical rigor with literary sensibility, it adumbrates an alternative style of cultural criticism for the new century. (David Wang, Columbia University)

The special flavor of prewar Shanghai emerges from these pages. *Shanghai Modern* is immensely rich in theoretical insights, and they emerge out of the dense, living portrait of old Shanghai, with its literary circles, dance-halls, movie theatres, façades, and streets. Lee makes you see how modern consciousness only exists in the circulation of forms, images, and ideas. The process is laid out before us in this rich and subtle description of the key epoch in the life of this tragic metropolis. (Charles Taylor, McGill University)

Lee is at his strongest in discussing the inter-textuality of the various works he discusses in this section of the book, showing their relationship to both the European and Chinese literary traditions...Lee's focus on republican-era Shanghai is a reminder of the renewed capacities of China's largest city as a producer of the discourse of modernity in the post-Mao era. (Antonia Finnane *Left History*)

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