

An Aesthetic Portrayal of Republican-era Shanghai: The exciting and discordant beauty of the metropolis in Zhang Ruogu's Urban Symphony

Ambra Minoli

School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Correspondence: ambra.minoli@warwick.ac.uk

Twitter: [@ambra_minoli](https://twitter.com/ambra_minoli)

Peer review: This article has been subject to a double-blind peer review process.



Copyright notice: This article is issued under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution License**, which permits use and redistribution of the work provided that the original author and source are credited.

You must give appropriate credit (author attribution), provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract

This article examines the aesthetic representation of Republican-era Shanghai in Zhang Ruogu's 張若谷 Duhui jiaoxiangqu 都會交響曲 ('Urban Symphony'). Guiding the construction of the city are Zhang's aesthetic principles of cijimei and podiaomei, two concepts taken from Japanese modernism, which convey a unique vision of Shanghai modernity. On the one hand, cijimei refers to a kind of 'exciting beauty', which, according to Zhang Ruogu, is the apex of modern aesthetics. Zhang Ruogu locates cijimei within modern Shanghai in places such as the city's cafés, dance halls, and cinemas. On the other hand, podiaomei can be translated as 'discordant beauty'. This kind of beauty differs from the traditional concept of harmonic beauty, as it originates in more modern surroundings that emphasise simplicity and excitement. Zhang Ruogu characterises podiaomei as 'simplification' and 'excitement'. When reading Zhang Ruogu's works, it is possible to identify these aesthetic elements in relation to his depiction of Shanghai. Thus, these concepts enhance our understanding of Zhang Ruogu's representation of urban culture in Republican-era Shanghai.

Keywords: Zhang Ruogu; Shanghai; Twentieth-century China; Shanghai modernity; Shanghai's urban culture; aesthetics

Introduction

This article examines the aesthetic portrayal of Shanghai in Zhang Ruogu's 張若谷 *Duhui jiaoxiangqu* 都會交響曲 ('Urban Symphony', 1929), which provides a fascinating and exotic representation of Shanghai during the Republican period (1912-1949).

Sociologists consider the metropolis to be the place in which modernity was, and still is, most manifest (Mele 2018: 119). Due to its strategic position, which facilitated trade, urban development, and cultural exchange both nationally and internationally, the cosmopolitan setting of Republican-era Shanghai undoubtedly played a pivotal role in China's consolidation of modernity. However, until recently, modernity in Republican Shanghai has mainly been understood from an 'Orientalist' perspective, largely as a result of a substantial foreign presence in the Chinese metropolis. Only since the late 1990s have scholars started to look at this phenomenon from a Chinese perspective and acknowledge that Shanghai's modernity was significantly shaped by the cosmopolitan sensibilities of Chinese intellectuals like Zhang Ruogu, who openly embraced Western cultures. The best example thereof is the rich number of Chinese translations of Western literature published in the Shanghai journal *Zhenmeishan* 真美善.

One of the main focuses of scholars of Republican-era Shanghai has been the urban culture. In *Shanghai Modern*, Leo Ou-Fan Lee defines Republican Shanghai as a cosmopolitan 'cultural laboratory' where writers and artists could experiment with new forms (1999: 20). By analysing the history behind Shanghai's urban culture, as well as its modern literary imagination, Lee presents a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the urban culture and space of 1920s and 1930s Shanghai. Lee's volume constitutes one of the few academic studies that provide some information about Zhang Ruogu. Shih Shu-Mei's *The Lure of the Modern* provides a rich analysis of the cultural production in Republican China. By considering China's semicolonial context, Shih argues that the Chinese modernists who exhibited a cosmopolitan stance chose not to engage with the political aspects of power relations, but instead focused on urban capitalist modernity and metropolitan culture of faraway cities in their cultural imaginary (2001: 374).

For the study of Zhang Ruogu, there is barely any work in English specifically focusing on his works. An analysis of Zhang Ruogu as a transcultural practitioner features in Chen Shuo-win's *Transculturating the Modern: Zhang Ruogu's Literary Life in 1930s Shanghai*, but it is limited to Zhang's reception of French literature and salon culture and lacks an in-depth analysis of Zhang's work as a writer. Nevertheless, Chen's research

provides useful information on Zhang's lifestyle in Shanghai and his literary activities there, which was a useful starting point for deeper investigation. Generally, studies on Zhang Ruogu refer to him as an avid Francophile and one of the friends and guests at Zeng Pu's bookstore-salon (Lee, 1999: 9).

Against this backdrop of the recent work on modern Shanghai's urban culture and Zhang Ruogu, this article investigates the aesthetic representation of the city in Zhang Ruogu's work. Considering Chinese scholarship, Chen and Xu features an analysis of Zhang Ruogu's urban aesthetic principles of *cijimei* 刺激美 (excitement beauty) and *podiaomei* 破調美 (discordant beauty) (Chen & Xu, 2004: 33-34). These concepts enhance the understanding of Zhang Ruogu's representation of urban culture in Republican Shanghai.

Although it is an unjustifiable oversimplification to consider Shanghai's modernity as a mere consequence of Western influence, it would be erroneous not to recognise the importance of foreign cultural imaginary in the construction of modern Shanghai. In this regard, the city's modernity resulted from the creative interaction of the metropolis with the rest of the world. To understand this multifaceted phenomenon as well as its literary implications, it is important to analyse modern literature on Shanghai. This article argues that Zhang Ruogu's aesthetic principles and literary influences from French modernism convey a distinctive aesthetic representation of modern Shanghai that has seldom been considered by scholars so far. This article will proceed as follows: first, I will briefly discuss relevant scholarly discussion on the foreignized representation of Republican-era Shanghai. Then, I will introduce Zhang Ruogu's background and his close connection to French culture, as exemplified by the French modernist literary techniques the author uses in his work *Urban Symphony*. Finally, I will argue that Zhang's aesthetic principles of *cijimei* and *podiaomei* that can be identified in *Urban Symphony* convey an aesthetic dimension of Shanghai's modernity.

Since this article only discusses the perspective of one author, it cannot be considered as a comprehensive analysis of the urban culture in 1920s Shanghai, but rather as the subjective view of one interesting yet overlooked Shanghai author who wrote during that culturally thriving time. All the translations from the Chinese in this article are my own.

Zhang Ruogu's background and French influences

Born in the Shanghai district of Nanhui (today merged into Pudong), Zhang Ruogu's (1905-1967) original name was Zhang Tiansong 張天松. Fluent in French and having spent most of his time in Shanghai's French Concession, he received a Catholic education at Collège Saint Ignace (*Xuhui Gongxue* 徐匯公學) founded by a French priest and graduated from Aurora

University (*Zhendān Dàxué* 震旦大學), following a similar path to other modern writers of Shanghai (Shi Zhecun, Liu Na'ou and Dai Wangshu). In one of his works, Zhang Ruogu mentions his great admiration for Ma Xiangbo, founder and principal of Aurora University, who stimulated him to embrace French culture (Zhang, 1939: 284).

As a writer, he is mainly known for his short informal essays, but he also worked as a translator and a journal editor for several publishing houses, including the well-known *Zhenmeishan* founded by father and son Zeng Pu 曾樸 and Zeng Xubai 曾虛白 in 1927. He is considered by scholars as a representative of modern Shanghai's urban writers (Chen, 2016: 261). Like other modern Shanghai writers, Zhang Ruogu's literary production revolves around sensory and emotional aspects of modern urban life, stemming largely from his personal experiences in the city in the 1920s which shaped his personal aesthetic taste. Therefore, his works can be ascribed to the 'neo-sensationalist' school (*Xin ganjue pai* 新感覺派), which holds an exotic appeal for Western modernity.

Such was the impact of modern lifestyle on Zhang's literary production that in the introduction to *Kafei zuotan* he describes three kinds of pleasures derived from going to the coffeehouse, a symbol of modernity: the 'excitement' (*ciji* 刺戟) derived from caffeine, which is not less than opium or alcohol (Zhang 1929: 4); the 'conversations' (*zuotan* 座談) with his friends, from whom he learns more than going to the library (Zhang 1929: 6); and the beauty of the 'waitresses' (*shinü* 侍女), which is pleasing to the opposite sex (Ibid: 9).

In *Guanyu wo ziji* 關於我自己 ('About myself'), the preface of his memoir *Wenxue shenghuo* 文學生活 (*Literary life*), Zhang introduces four mentors of his literary life in his upbringing who affected his writing the most (1928: 21). In particular, Père Pierre, a French priest at Collège Saint Ignace who guided him to read a hundred of the most important French literary works. French Professor Germain of the Faculté De Lettres-Droit at Aurora University, on the other hand, inspired him by introducing Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables* to him. After reading this book, Zhang Ruogu was inspired to become a Doctor of Letters.

For Zhang Ruogu, French modernism had a deep appeal. Therefore, it is possible to identify different literary techniques in his writing that subscribe to the French modernist style. Among these is his usage of mixed languages, such as the local Shanghai dialect and French. *Duhui jiaoxiangqu* begins with Zhang Ruogu's quotation of Vicente Blasco Ibáñez in French: "Je Voudrais retourner en Asie, rien que Pour écrire le roman de Shanghai" ("I would like to return to Asia, just to write the novel of Shanghai") (Zhang, 1929: 1). Another example is Tian Xiaohong shouting

in French “Encore! Encore!” (“Again! Again!”) after the music performance of *Libiamo ne' lieti calici* by Giuseppe Verdi at Master Peng’s mansion (Zhang, 1929: 16). Code-switching can be regarded as one of the manifestations of the transcultural nature of Shanghai modernism. The transcultural nature of the Shanghai authors who wrote during the first half of the twentieth century is also highlighted by Peng Hsiao-yen (2010: 41).

Furthermore, exposure to capitalism and consumerism are intrinsic attributes of modernity. According to Lee, new cultural institutions such as the coffeehouse, the dance hall and the cinema became ‘central sites of Shanghai’s urban culture’ (1999: 17). Modern Shanghai authors fully embraced Occidental exoticism, so much so that elements of it are often portrayed in the description of Shanghai’s urban milieu. For example, they are portrayed in Zhang Ruogu’s presentation of all the names of restaurants, cinemas, and the brands of different commodities, such as the Steinway piano, the Coty cosmetics and the French perfume 4711.

Another modernist technique to be considered is the fast-paced description of the sequence of the events narrated. A notable example of this can be found in the Prelude (*qianzouqu* 前奏曲):

四篇都是高速度的 Allegro 的節奏；裏面有輕揚高下 Crescendo 和 Diminuendo 等的音調；每篇中的主人物就是獨奏曲的旋律；背景環境和時分就是和聲伴音。

[The four novels are all in high pace Allegro rhythm. There are tones such as Crescendo and Diminuendo, the main character in each novel is like a solo melody; the background setting and time are the backing vocalists.] (Zhang 1929: 8)

Examples of ‘Exciting Beauty’ and ‘Discordant Beauty’ in Urban Symphony

In 1932 Zhang went to Europe for two years, where he studied at Universitas Catholica Lovaniensis in Belgium, before returning to Shanghai in January 1935. For the Chinese intellectuals of his generation, studying in Japan and the Soviet Union was the mainstream. According to Lee, Zhang Ruogu was one of the three aestheticians at Zeng’s bookstore-salon, together with Fu Yanchang and Zhu Yingpeng (1999: 20). Zhang’s aesthetic principles are discussed in his essay *Cijimei yu podiaomei* 刺激美與破調美 (‘Exciting beauty and discordant beauty’), where he defines two Japanese concepts of modern metropolitan beauty. The first one, *cijimei* refers to a kind of ‘exciting beauty’, which, according to Zhang Ruogu, is the apex of modern aesthetics (Zhang, 1929: 136-137). Zhang Ruogu locates *cijimei* within modern Shanghai in places such as the city’s cafés,

dance halls, cinemas, as well as at football games and horse races. The second one, *podiaomei* can be translated as 'discordant beauty'. This kind of beauty differs from the traditional concept of harmonic beauty, as it originates in more modern surroundings that emphasise simplicity and excitement.

As a critical reader of modern Japanese literary magazines, Zhang Ruogu's theorisation of *podiaomei* is likely to be grounded in the works of Japanese writer Kurahara Korehito (**Ibid: 135**). According to Korehito, the standard of art constantly evolves with time, and modern aesthetic principles are based on ideas of the metropolis and machines. On this basis, Zhang Ruogu characterises *podiaomei* as 'simplification' and 'excitement'. Examples of *podiaomei* are the frenetic folk songs in music, the use of rich and strong primary colours in painting, and the solid colours used in fashion, such as black eyebrows, red lipstick, and in the black *qipao*. According to Zhang Ruogu, the aesthetic concepts of *cijimei* and *podiaomei* are the two main trends of modern art (**Chen et al., 2014**). When reading Zhang Ruogu's works, it is possible to identify these aesthetic elements in relation to his depiction of Shanghai.

By vividly describing the material enjoyment Zhang Ruogu and his friends experienced in the city, the four short stories featured in *Urban Symphony* (1929) constitute a rich representation of 1920s Shanghai's urban culture. In the collection's preface, Zhang Ruogu states that his work was influenced by Paul Morand and, although his description of the city is not entirely realistic, the ending of the story was directly taken from a real newspaper (**Zhang, 1929: 169**).

The first story, 'Urban Symphony', is about the nightlife of a few Shanghai natives (*Szahaenin*), including the novelist Bao Du 包度 and the Kuomintang official Tian Xiaohong 田小虹. During their walks through the city, they go to many different entertaining places. Bao Du briefly mentions a friend of his, a certain Zhang Rushan 章如山, in his comments regarding the importance of nightlife to the residents of Shanghai:

住在上海的人不去過夜生活，老早回到家裏睡覺，辜負了這樣可愛的都會黃昏，未免太可惜了。就譬如我們朋友中的章如山就是這樣的人物中的一個代表。他是一個很熱情的青年，無論做什麼事都是興高采烈的。但是，生活却很安分，素來沒有在外邊歇過夜。他對於朋友也是非常重感情的，但是對於女性卻從來沒有什麼狂烈的熱情，常好像修道院的修士一般，真是咄咄怪事。

[It is truly a pity for people living in Shanghai to not have a nightlife; to go home to sleep early, to fail to live up to this lovely metropolitan evening. Our friend Zhang Rushan is an example of such a character. He is a very enthusiastic young man, no matter what he is doing, he is always in high spirits. However, he is well-behaved in his life – he has never stayed out overnight. He values friendship, but he has never had a passion for women, just like a monk in the monastery – such a strange thing!] (Zhang, 1929: 3-4)

What emerges from this quotation is the opposition between Bao Du's ideal of metropolitan life and his friend's 'well-behaved' (*anfen* 安分) lifestyle, which seems to lack interest in nights out or in women. Through the depiction of Zhang Rushan as an exception, it can be inferred that a lively nightlife was common for the modern urban youth living in Shanghai in the 1920s.

It is exactly at night that all the modern urban elements reflecting Zhang Ruogu's aesthetic principle of *cijimei* are revealed, places such as the foreign restaurants and cafés, where one could eat with a fork and knife and drink foreign soft drinks such as coke; the cinemas, with their alluring advertisements; the professional photo shops; the entertaining horse or dog race shows; the foreign-run massage shops, with their electric massage chairs; and the gambling machines. All these elements provide a representation of 1920s Shanghai as a heaven of leisure. As mentioned earlier, Zhang Ruogu has largely focused on his engagement with Shanghai's salon culture and his regular visits to coffeehouses, which was common practice amongst intellectuals at the time. However, there is a wealth of other elements of urban modernity emerging from *Urban Symphony* which are worth looking at.

Firstly, the seductive posters outside the cinemas held an interesting social function. Cinema was a new visual medium in Republican Shanghai, and it represented a special cultural matrix for Shanghai city dwellers, as it provided opportunities to socialise in an urban public space (Lee, 1999: 82-91). Thus, alongside frequenting bookstores and coffeehouses, visiting cinemas became one of the favourite social rituals for many writers including Shi Zhecun, Liu Na'Ou, Xu Chi, Mu Shiyong, and Zhang Ruogu. The cinema as a modern urban milieu par excellence, together with its tempting film posters as a medium for advertising, contributed to the glamorised image of Shanghai as a world of leisure and entertainment. This is clear in the mention of alluring film posters outside a cinema in *Urban Symphony*:

走前十數步，從強烈的白熱光下，映見一帶大幅的電影廣告。畫裏許多明眸皓齒的嬌媚女郎正在勾引著路上的醉男痴女，到那些黑暗的場所去，消磨光陰。紅色的大字寫著卡爾登今日開映《肉體之道》，主演者德國大明星愛密爾約甯；還有那大光明的《巴黎艷舞記》，夏令配克的《肉體與愛情》，光陸的《漠中情血》，上海大戲院的《不夜天》，百星的《蕩婦心》，奧迪安的《春宵艷曲》一切都在炫迷人目，魅惑人心。

[After walking forward a dozen steps, under the strong, warm neon light reflects a huge film poster. In that picture are many beautiful and flirtatious young women attracting passers-by on the street to spend their time in those dark rooms [of the cinema]. Big red characters announcing today's shows at Carlton cinema: The Way of All Flesh, starring the famous German actor, Emil Jannings. Also, A Trip through the Streets of Paris at Grand Cinema, Flesh and the Devil at Olympic Cinema, Love in the Desert at Guanglu Theatre, Out All Night at The Shanghai Grand Theatre, Prostitute at Pantheon Theatre, Serenade at Odeon Theatre. All of these are tempting people's eyes and hearts.] (Zhang, 1929: 8)

Furthermore, by reporting a detailed listing of cinemas and films, the author presents a reliable record of his personal experience. Des Forges defines referentiality as a narrative strategy that emphasises the interrelationship between fiction and other media through the mimetic reproduction of real references, e.g. street names, theatres, restaurants, etc. (Des Forges, 2007: 65-68). This mimetic representation of Shanghai city space through recognisable names and references is instrumental in portraying the specific social reality that characterised Shanghai's urban culture in the 1920s. Referentiality as a literary technique was widely used by Shanghai writers, as it conferred a specific social meaning to the space in which the narrative unfolded (Ibid: 58).

Taking Zhang Ruogu as an example, it is significant that all the cinemas mentioned in *Urban Symphony* are located in the American and English Concessions of the International Settlement of Shanghai, particularly around Fuzhou Road. These areas were associated with the modern entertainment culture, 'an exotic world of glitter and vice dominated by Western capitalism' that lay at the centre of Shanghai's leisure activities, in which one could truly experience the exciting urban lifestyle (Lee, 1999: 8). Therefore, *Urban Symphony* suggests that going to the cinema in the foreign concessions was an integral part of Zhang Ruogu's cosmopolitan lifestyle in Republican-era Shanghai. Moreover, by describing film posters as feminine and attractive, the author emphasises his aesthetic principle of *cijimei*, which he finds reflected in the cinema itself.

A second element that represents the ‘exciting beauty’ of the modern metropolitan lifestyle in Zhang Ruogu’s novel is the gambling machines in the casinos. Colourful and exhilarating, they are a perfect example of urban *cijimei*:

包度摸出一個雙角銀毫，放進櫃旁一個小洞裏，右手用力把一個鐵柄向下扳動，只見那幾張香烟畫片般的東西旋轉不已，紅顏綠色，煞是好看。最後四張畫片正好轉到一色，四隻金鐘並列，嘩喇喇一陣響頓時有幾十個角子從櫃裏滾出來…扳中了頭彩。

[Bao Du took out a two-cent silver coin and put it into a small hole next to the slot machine. With his right hand, he pulled down mightily on an iron handle and only saw those cigarette picture-like things spinning unceasingly, red and green, extremely beautiful. The last four pictures happened to turn to the same colour – four golden bells were standing side by side, then suddenly dozens of coins came clattering down the slot machine in a loud fashion...he had won the jackpot.] (Zhang, 1929: 36-37)

The narrator’s meticulous description of the reels spinning and finally stopping conveys his deep enthrallment with the gambling game. From a psychological point of view, gambling pleasure derives not only from the sensational excitement of gambling, but also from the interaction of gamblers with other gamblers (Lam, 2007). Accordingly, like cinemas, Shanghai casinos provided a suitable environment for urban dwellers to socialise and actively spend their free time through the consumption of commodities (Des Forges, 2007: 106). However, this kind of leisure-based socialisation reflects a condition of deep loneliness and uncertainty shared by the urban dwellers:

其實愈是愛向熱鬧場中尋求歡樂的人，愈是會覺得人海一粟般的孤寂。都會裡的一切人物萬象，只能使人感到官感上一剎那的刺激快樂，但決不足以慰人們心靈上永遠的悲哀，不能消除那不可捉摸的恐怖。

[Actually, the more one seeks pleasure in the bustling stage [of the city], the lonelier he feels in the sea of people. All the human manifestations in the metropolis can only provide an instant of joy and excitement, but they are not enough to comfort the sorrows of the soul, nor to eliminate the horror of uncertainty.] (Zhang, 1940: 46)

In *Yiguo Qingdiao*, Zhang Ruogu identifies the artists’ decadent lifestyle as a result of capitalist oppression (Zhang, 1929: 6). A significant example of this is the moment when, after winning the jackpot, Bao Du throws the coins:

六片櫻桃般的嘴唇，你一句，我一句，說得包度心花怒放，樂不可支。把盤裏所有五六十角的銀角子，灑在地上，三個女招待慌忙蹲到地上去搶拾。等到伊們站起來定神旋過頭來望時，包度，田小虹與彭少爺都早已揚長出門去了。

[Six cherry-like lips, one sentence after another, made Bao Du burst with joy and amusement. He sprinkled all the fifty to sixty silver coins on the ground, and three waitresses squatted down in a great rush to fight over them. When they had finally stood up, composed themselves, and turned their heads – Bao Du, Tian Xiaohong and Master Peng had already gone out.] (Zhang, 1929: 38)

It is important to note a similarity between this scene of Bao Du playfully throwing the coins to the ground to see the rushing waitresses pick them up, and another scene in *Shanghai* by Riichi Yokomitsu, a Japanese writer and contemporary to Zhang Ruogu who also lived in Shanghai during the Republican period. Namely, the scene of Sanki dropping coins through the necks of the women in the teahouse (**Yokomitsu, 1931: 48**). Whilst the scene in Yokomitsu's novel has an intentionally symbolic meaning, signifying greed and the commodification of women, Zhang Ruogu's depiction of a similar scene serves as a confirmation of the oppression of capitalism which leads to decadence, a phenomenon that characterised modern Shanghai's urban culture.

Finally, *Urban Symphony* also features some examples of *podiaomei*, the second aesthetic principle that characterises urban modernity as discussed by Zhang Ruogu in *Yiguo Qingdiao*. Firstly, after dining with Master Peng 彭少爺 and visiting his Western-style mansion, the group of friends later decide to go out again. There, following persistent encouragement by Mrs. Peng, Bao Du puts on some red lipstick and tweezes his eyebrows. Secondly, when they go to the YMCA club, Tian Xiaohong observes the solid yellow colour of the tablecloth, as well as the yellow-painted windows, which remind him of the Tibetan palace of Panchen Lama (**Zhang, 1929: 35**). According to Tian Xiaohong, the flashy yellow colour represents *podiaomei* as it does not conform to the traditional aesthetic principles of Western civilisation. A third example of *podiaomei* can be identified in the short and plain white dress of the Japanese dancer Chunzi 春子 (**Ibid: 51**).

Although Zhang Ruogu's representation of 1920s Shanghai is mainly focused on the modern exciting lifestyle and the vast variety of leisure opportunities offered by the metropolis, *Duhui jiaoxiangqu* also provides some deeper commentary about the psychological aspects of the metropolitan experience. Namely, as Zhang observes, the urban life might

look exciting and joyful on the surface, but the sensory stimulation experienced in the city is temporary, and the more one tends to look for excitement, the more miserable one actually feels:

我們果然好像都是我們果然好像都是沉緬於酒色中的不良少年。像今夜的生活一樣，的確完全是幾個公子少爺兒的生活...我們置身於高速的節奏的近代都會中，被捲入於交錯式的生躍活動的漩渦裏。應該是感到無上的滿足與歡樂的了不再會有什麼煩悶什麼寂寞的了。其實愈是愛向熱鬧場中尋歡樂的人，愈是會覺得人海一粟的寂寞孤寂。都會裏的一切人物萬象，祇能使人感到官感上一剎那的刺戟快樂但決不足以慰人們心靈上永遠的悲哀。

[Sure enough, we all look like bad teenagers who are indulging ourselves in wine and sex. Just like our life tonight, it was entirely the lifestyle of some dandies...We live under the high-speed rhythm of the modern city, and we are drawn into the vortex of interlaced activities. It must be that we have felt a supreme satisfaction and joy; free from boredom and loneliness. Actually, the more one seeks joy in the lively fields of people, the lonelier one feels, like a drop in the sea. All the people in the city can only provide a momentary sting of happiness through excitement, but it is by no means enough to comfort a person's eternal sorrow.] (Zhang, 1929: 40)

The condition of loneliness experienced by the citizens and their consequent search for excitement as a temporary remedy is a well-known theme within the social sciences. By highlighting this aspect of Zhang Ruogu's personal experience, *Duhui jiaoxiangqu* offers a thought-provoking perspective on 1920s Shanghai.

Nevertheless, Zhang Ruogu hardly represents any negative aspects of 1920s Shanghai in his writing. It is possible that Zhang's choice to exclusively focus on the exciting and glamorous aspects of city life was influenced by his Francophile sensibility, which led him to juxtapose Westernised Shanghai with his beloved Paris.

Overall, it is possible to identify both elements of *cijimei* and *podiaomei* in *Urban Symphony*. *Cijimei*, defined as pure excitement deriving from leisure activities, appears to be the dominant aesthetic principle in Zhang Ruogu's works. Less marked but by no means less relevant is the presence of *podiaomei*, which is depicted as opposition to traditional aesthetic values. On the one hand, the emphasis on Shanghai's nightlife, the eye-catching posters attracting visitors to the cinemas, and the gambling machines are examples of *cijimei*. On the other hand, examples of *podiaomei* are Bao Du's eyebrows and lipstick, the solid yellow tablecloth and windows at the YMCA club, and the short white dress of the dancer.

The literary technique of referentiality reflected in the listing of cinemas and movies conveys a specific social reality that revolves around a leisurely lifestyle in the foreign concessions of Shanghai. At the same time, the shadow of capitalism emerges from the scene of Bao Du throwing coins to the ground and the waitresses dashing to collect them. In addition to this scene, the author's remark that the exciting lifestyle of Shanghai is merely compensation for the deeper spiritual concerns of its citizens throws light on another aspect of the urban culture in 1920s Shanghai. Thus, Zhang Ruogu's work also reflects the popular image of Republican-era Shanghai as 'a city of sin, pleasure, and carnality, awash with the phantasmagoria of urban consumption and commodification' (Shih, 2001: 232).

Conclusion

This article has investigated Zhang Ruogu's representation of modern Shanghai in early Republican China (between the 1920s and the 1930s) from an aesthetic perspective. Overall, Zhang Ruogu's portrayal of Shanghai in *Urban Symphony* emphasises the excitement and pleasure of life in the metropolis. The author's representation of the local urban culture is governed by two aesthetic principles: *cijimei* (the beauty of excitement) and *podiaomei* (modern beauty that distances itself from traditional canons). Examples of *cijimei* within *Urban Symphony* include the nightlife of Shanghai, the alluring film posters outside cinemas, and the gambling machines in casinos. According to Zhang, the excitement derived from these elements is characteristic of Shanghai's modern urban culture. Moreover, examples of *podiaomei* include Bao Du's lipstick and painted eyebrows, the solid colours of the tables, and the short dress of the female dancer in a club. Zhang's representation of westernised Shanghai as a city of glamour and excitement seems to reflect the author's admiration for French cities, which he frequently recalls throughout *Urban Symphony* in his descriptions of Shanghai.

However, in addition to vividly representing the urban culture, *Urban Symphony* also offers some reflections on the psychological consequences of this lifestyle; according to Zhang Ruogu, the constant search for excitement is fuelled by the sense of intense loneliness the individual experiences in the metropolis. Overall, by highlighting modernity as a concept reflected particularly in Shanghai's fast-paced metropolitan lifestyle, Zhang's representation gives the reader a fascinating perspective on Shanghai's thriving urban culture. In this respect, Zhang Ruogu fully embodies the enthusiasm of the local Chinese towards the exciting and exotic lifestyle Republican-era Shanghai offered.

Ambra Minoli is a current PhD student in Translation and Transcultural Studies at the University of Warwick, under the supervision of Dr Liu Qian and Dr Susannah Wilson. Her PhD is funded by the Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership (AHRC). She obtained her bachelor's degree in Modern Languages and Literatures (cum laude) from the University of Bergamo in 2017 and her master's degree in MSc Chinese Studies (distinction) from the University of Edinburgh in 2020. Her project investigates the foreignised representations of Shanghai during the Republican era as reflected in the literary works of Chinese and French authors.



References

- Chen, S.W., 2016. Transculturing the modern: Zhang Ruogu's literary life in 1930s Shanghai. *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese 現代中文文學學報*, 13 (1), pp. 260-286.
- Chen, X. 陈曠 and Xu, Y. 徐勇., 2014. Minguo shiqi Shanghai Zhang Ruogu dou hui sanwen chuanguozuolun 民国时期上海张若谷都会散文创作论 [Expounding Zhang Ruogu's Metropolis Prose Creation in Shanghai During the Period of the Republic of China]. *Dali xueyuan xuebao 大理学院学报*, 13 (5), pp. 30-35.
- Des Forges, A., 2007. *Mediasphere Shanghai: The Aesthetics of Cultural Production*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
- Lam, D., 2007. An Exploratory Study of Gambling Motivations and Their Impact on the Purchase Frequencies of Various Gambling Products. *Psychology and Marketing* 24 (9), pp. 815-827.
- Lee, L. O. F., 1999. *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930- 1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mele, V., 2018. Before and Beyond the Masses. Simmel, Benjamin, and the Sociology of Crowds. *Tocqueville Review* 39 (1), pp. 119-140.
- Peng, H.Y., 2010. *Dandyism and Transcultural Modernity: The dandy, the flaneur, and the translator in 1930s Shanghai, Tokyo, and Paris*. New York: Routledge.
- Shi, S.M., 2001. *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zhang, R. 張若谷, 1929. *Duhui Jiaoxiangqu 都會交響曲* [Urban Symphony]. Shanghai: Zhenmeishan shudian.

Zhang, R. 張若谷, 1928. Guanyu wo ziji 關於我自己 [About Myself]. *Shenbao* 申報, 27 February 1928, p. 21.

Zhang, R. 張若谷, 1939. *Ma Xiangbo xiansheng nianpu* 馬相伯先生年譜 [A chronicle of Ma Xiangbo]. Shanghai: Commercial Press.

Zhang, R. 張若谷, 1940. *Shiwu nian xiezuozuo jingyan* 十五年寫作經驗 [Fifteen Years of Writing Experience]. Shanghai: Gufeng chubanshe.

Zhang, R. 張若谷, 1929. *Yiguo Qingdiao* 異國情調 [Exotic Atmospheres]. Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe.

Zhou, G. 周广平., 2018. Cong Zhang Ruogu qiren, qizhu kan 20 shiji ersanshi niandai de Shanghai shehui yinyue shenghuo. 从张若谷其人、其著看 20 世纪二三十年代的上海社会音乐生活 [On twentieth-century 1920s-1930s musical life of Shanghai society, from Zhang Ruogu's life and writings]. *Xinghai yinyue xueyuan xuebao* 星海音乐学院学报 3, pp. 37- 54.

Zhou, Y. 周允中., 2000. You guan Zhang Ruogu de yi xie wang shi 有关张若谷的一些往事 [Some past events about Zhang Ruogu]. *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* 鲁迅研究月刊, 9, pp. 86-88.

To cite this article:

Minoli, A., 2023. An Aesthetic Portrayal of Republican-era Shanghai: The exciting and discordant beauty of the metropolis in Zhang Ruogu's Urban Symphony. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 10(3), 48-61. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v10i3.920>.