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Red Shanghai, Blue Shanghai

Jeff Wasserstrom

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> What color would you associate with Shanghai? Do you choose red? Or yellow? Or blue?
>
> Most people choose blue… Blue stands for the coast…[And Shanghai's link to the sea made it] China's great gateway to the outside world.
>
> Shanghai's color—it *is* blue!
>
> But today I want to tell you that Shanghai is another color as well—it is also red!
>
> *Shanghai Hongse Luyou [A Red Tour of Shanghai]*, 2005



Site of the First Party Congress; author's photograph 2007.



"Big Ching"; author's photograph 2008.

The goal of the guidebook quoted from above is to encourage Chinese spending time in Shanghai to focus on visiting its "red" sites. That is, it steers them toward places with clear ties to the revolutionary past, such as the

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house on a tree-lined street in the former French Concession where Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) lived out the final years of his life, and the building not far from there where, according to the textbooks at least, the Chinese Communist Party was founded on July 1, 1921 (there are competing stories about the organization's origin).

A Red Tour of Shanghai also encourages readers to focus, when looking backward, on years associated with the "reddest" of Shanghai events. The May 30th Movement of 1925, for example, named for the date on which members of a foreign-run police force fired into a crowd of Chinese protesters, killing several people, wounding others, and triggering a general strike that paralyzed business throughout the metropolis.

What intrigues me about the book, as someone who first started spending time in Shanghai in the 1980s, is that the author thinks it necessary to convince Chinese readers that the city isn't just a place known for its "blue" sites built in the early 1900s—places such as the neo-classical Custom House (with its giant clock nicknamed "Big Ching" that was manufactured in England and shipped to China with great fanfare) and the domed Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Headquarters (once the largest bank building in the world) that evoke the port's historic ties to international fashions, international finance, and Western lands across the sea.



Mural inside of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Building (now the Pudong Development Bank).



The Maglev train, with the Pudong Airport in the background.

Twenty years ago, while some guidebooks in Western languages presented Shanghai's allure as tied to its glamorous treaty-port era incarnation as a cosmopolitan "Paris of the East," the ones in Chinese simply took it for granted that the city's importance lay in its contributions to the Revolution. No Chinese reader needed to be reminded then that Shanghai had a "red" side. The treaty-port era was presented in domestic guidebooks of the time as a period of humiliation, when Chinese were treated as second-class citizens within a part of their own country and evil imperialists exploited the local population.

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In recent years, this vision of the past has changed dramatically. Chinese and Western guidebooks alike celebrate the city's "blue" sites—whether old ones like the Custom House and Hongkong and Shanghai Bank and other landmarks of the Bund, such as the Peace Hotel, or new ones like the futuristic German-engineered high speed magnetic levitation train across the river in Pudong (East Shanghai).

And nostalgia for Old Shanghai focuses on "blue" visions of a pleasure-mad, stylish, money-fixated city, where saxophones always played, the latest Hollywood movies were always showing (and stars like Charlie Chaplin sometimes passed through), and the neon never went out.



A Shanghai advertisement ca. 1930 for perfume; the nostalgia craze has spurred a large market for reproductions of calendar girl and ad shots like this one.



The Starbucks at Xintiandi; author's photograph 2007.

In the battle of the guidebooks now being waged, the struggle is between seeing Shanghai as tinted a cosmopolitan and jazzy blue or painted revolutionary red, but a good case can be made for refusing to make a choice between the two. After all, one of the most fascinating things about the metropolis is the way that so many sites and so many individual years can be associated with both hues. The most famous contemporary example is that the museum devoted to the First Party Congress (a "red" site if there ever was one) is now bordered by the boutiques and international eateries of Xintiandi (New Heaven and Earth). And just to show how complicated separating the "blue" from the "red" can be, within Xintiandi, there is both a Starbucks and a place called Che's, which honors a red figure but also promiscuously evokes in its décor the decadence of Old Havana, back in the pre-revolutionary times when it was a kind of Caribbean counterpart to Old Shanghai.

Long before Xintiandi was built, however, there were other places where "blue" and "red"

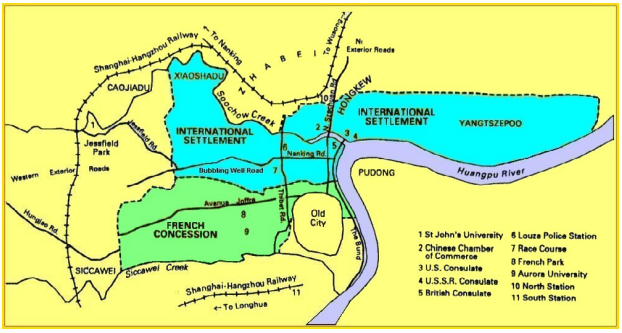
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activities mixed together. Take, for instance, the former residence of President Sun Yat-sen. Yes, the Communists, like the Nationalists, view Sun as a glorious revolutionary leader, and, yes, in his final years he looked to the Soviet Union as a key ally. But his home in the French Concession was not just a place where "red" plans were hatched. It was also where the American liberal John Dewey went to dine when he came to Shanghai in 1919, and where Sun and his American-educated wife, Soong Qingling, relaxed by playing croquet.

As for "red" years that also have their "blue" sides, consider 1925. This was not only the year of the May 30th Movement, but also the year that saw the founding of the Liangyou publishing house—a publishing house that would issue many books and magazine devoted to fashion and works of popular culture, including both Hollywood films and Chinese films influenced by those made in the West.



Cover of *Xinqingnian*.



A map of Shanghai's three jurisdictions circa 1930.

Moreover, it is important to note that the activists and revolutionaries who led the May 30th Movement, though inspired by a "red" ideology, often had their "blue" side as well. They had international tastes, often acquired during time spent studying in Japan or the West, and they deserved to be seen as belonging in a category of intellectuals I dub "cosmopolitan nationalists" in my new book, *Global Shanghai, 1850-2010: A History in Fragments.* The most famous Shanghai residents circa 1925 to fit under this rubric were Sun Yat-sen (who died in March of that year) and Soong Qingling (who would briefly serve as a high-ranking official in the city in 1950, showing that "cosmopolitan nationalists" were not immediately seen as suspect once the Communist Party took control of the metropolis). Two other exemplary cosmopolitan nationalists active in revolutionary circles in the Shanghai of 1925, each of whom took part in the May 30th Movement, were Qu Qiubai and Cai Hesen. Both were interesting enough characters to warrant thumbnail sketches in "red" and "blue" guides to Shanghai alike, though they are much more often mentioned in the former than the latter.

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The Wing On Department Store on Nanjing Road marks its 90th anniversary; author's photograph 2008.

Qu, who spent the mid-1920s teaching at Shanghai University (the most radical local educational institution), was one of the first leaders of the Chinese Communist Party. He had gained fame early within radical circles, thanks to going to Russia right after the Bolsheviks took power and sending back a series of positive reports on life in the new system that were published in China. He also got a chance to meet Lenin himself while abroad. Qu, who developed a reputation as a suave dresser and generally something of a dandy, regularly contributed political articles to *Xin Qingnian* ("La Jeunesse" or "New Youth") and other CCP periodicals such as *Xiangdao Zhoubao* (the Guide Weekly).

He was also an active translator of foreign works including, most famously, a song,"L'Internationale," that had already begun to serve as the global anthem of the Communist movement. While at Shanghai University, Qu married Yang Zhihua, who became an important force within the local labor and women's movements.

Cai Hesen was very different from Qu Qiubai in some ways but similar to him in others. Cai studied in France as opposed to Russia, and while there earned a reputation for being unconcerned with his personal appearance (allegedly only washing and changing his clothes occasionally). But like Qu he married someone who would become a major feminist voice within the CCP: Xiang Jingyu. According to Steve Smith's account in *A Road is Made: Communism in Shanghai, 1920-1927*—the two met abroad and their 1920 "wedding photograph," taken in Montargis, shows the couple "sitting side by side, holding a copy of *Das Kapital*." After being kicked out of France for their role in a student protest, they settled in Shanghai, where Cai wrote regularly for many of the same journals to which Qu contributed.

Shanghai, to people of the sort just described, whether or not they were Marxists, was an alluring place to live for many reasons. One attraction of the metropolis was purely pragmatic. The division of the city into two international jurisdictions and a Chinese municipality meant that if one's activities (say, publishing a radical newspaper) attracted the attention of a given police force, one could easily move to another district and go on with what one had been doing.



Streetside display, just off of Nanjing Road, evoking an early era in the Wing On store's

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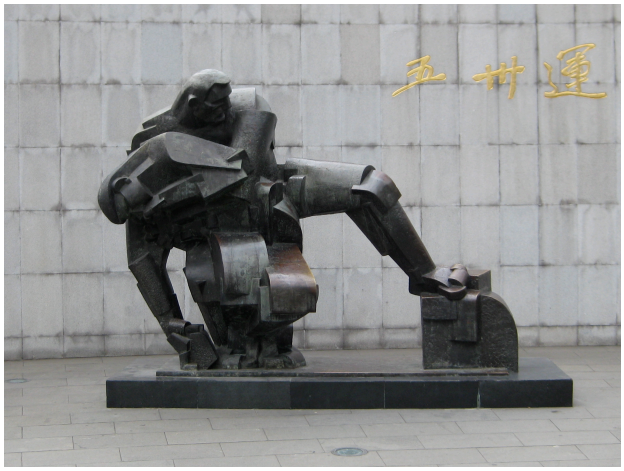
history; author's photograph 2008.



A plaque on Nanjing Road commemorating the May 30th Movement; key marches in the struggle took place on this boulevard; author's photograph 2008.

Another attraction was the ready availability of foreign products. For those who had developed a taste for Russian borscht, French bread, Austrian pastries, or Japanese sashimi, Shanghai was a very good place to live. Similarly, for those who liked to read Dickens or Zola, Molière or Marx, and to keep up with new work that was being written in Japan or translated into Japanese, Shanghai was the best Chinese city in which to reside.

In addition to this, if one wanted an opportunity to listen to speeches by or perhaps even get a chance to meet major foreign intellectual figures, it was advantageous to be located either in Beijing or in Shanghai. Dewey was not the only famous foreign philosopher to pass through Shanghai between the end of World War II and the start of the May 30th Movement, for example. Bertrand Russell came through town soon after Dewey, and one of the most exciting Shanghai events of 1924 (for local intellectuals at least) was the arrival of another Nobel Prize winner, the great Indian philosopher and poet Rabindranath Tagore. His stay in Shanghai began with a reception sponsored by local publishing houses and other groups that was attended by more than 1,200 people.



Statue honoring the "red" workers and martyrs of 1925; author's photograph 2008.

Despite the allure that Shanghai held for them as a place to live, many cosmopolitan nationalists fixed on it as a symbol of national humiliation in their writings. Consider a piece that Cai Hesen wrote in the November 16, 1923, edition of *Xiangdao Zhoubao*. Foreigners were preparing to celebrate the eightieth anniversary of the implementation of the Treaty of Nanjing that paved the way for the Treaty Ports and the first of the city's foreign-run districts, Cai wrote, but this was not a joyous occasion for Shanghai's Chinese residents. Prior to 1843,"every stone and every blade of grass" in Shanghai had belonged to them, but now there were parks they couldn't even enter. Nor could Chinese vote or stand for office in the enclaves.

In the "red" version of local history, the general strikes of 1925, which swelled the ranks of the Communist Party thanks partly to the power of propaganda written by Cai and Qiu and their colleagues, sealed the fate of imperialist control of Shanghai. You would not have known

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it at the time, though. For late 1925 was when work began on the Custom House atop which Big Ching—one of the most important and recognizable symbols of the foreign presence in the city—would be placed two years later, when the building was completed.

Big Ching is a fitting icon to linger on in any consideration of the need to see Shanghai as both red and blue, rather than just as a city of any single hue. Why? Because those who go to Shanghai now and are near the giant clock when it rings out the quarter hours will hear its chimes play not a foreign tune but "The East is Red," a Communist anthem based on a Chinese folk song.

There are many other locales in the contemporary metropolis that also speak powerfully to the mixed hues of the city's past, including Nanjing Road, Shanghai's most famous shopping street. Wandering along this Boulevard a few weeks ago, I was struck by the juxtaposition of two very different kinds of reminders of the treaty-port era. Walking from the riverfront Bund end of the street toward People's Square (the former race course that during Mao's days was the site of giant loyalist rallies on "red" holidays such as National Day), I passed by the Wing On Department store, one of the two most famous places to shop in Shanghai between the wars, and noted that it was marking its 90th anniversary.

This was celebrated via banners and slogans that festooned the large store's outer walls and by means of an eye-catching outdoor display of artifacts from the past—a vintage car, a rickshaw, an old tram—that encouraged tourists and locals to imagine that they had stepped back in time to the days when Sun Yat-sen met John Dewey and the opening of the latest Charlie Chaplin film was the talk of the town.



One of several different posters seen by the author in Shanghai in November 2008 that drew attention to the days left until the May 1, 2010, start of the World Expo; author's photograph 2008.



A statue of "Haibao" on Nanjing Road, between the May 30th plaque and the May 30th monument; author's photograph 2008.

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Continuing on this route, however, I passed first a descriptive commemorative plaque and then a large stylized statue of a heroic worker supporting his slain comrade in arms, both reminding passersby that this street played a central role in the May 30th Movement of 1925.

If he had been walking with me during this bit of sightseeing, the author of *Red Tour of Shanghai* would have been pleased, no doubt, to see that reminders of the revolutionary past have not disappeared completely from a boulevard that now contains a giant Nike store, a Starbucks, and many other symbols of global capitalism. He might have been less gratified to realize, however, that people were not lining up to have their pictures taken in front of the statue honoring red workers of the past. Instead, they wanted to have their day on Nanjing Road immortalized by a shot of themselves posing in front of the effigy of a strange figure called "Haibao," the Gumbie-like mascot of the upcoming 2010 World Expo.

This is an event that will be held in Shanghai in less than 600 days (as posters throughout the metropolis remind visitors), and which is being touted as an "Economic Olympics" (to link it to the Beijing extravaganza that recently ended).

Promoters hope that this "first World's Fair ever held in the developing world" (another way it is being billed) will bring 70 million visitors to the city (from all parts of China and abroad from Hong Kong to Honolulu and Houston), many being whisked from the airport to the exposition grounds by maglev trains (a form of transportation introduced into the city in part to show that it was futuristic enough to deserve to host an event devoted to both international cooperation and 21st century technology).

Haibao has been the subject of a good deal of ridicule in Shanghai, as statues portraying him are popping up throughout the metropolis at a rapid rate, books featuring him on the cover fill bookstores, and posters with his smiling face have become impossible to avoid on a walk through the city, especially since they are plastered on so many of the walls to the urban center's hundreds upon hundreds of construction sites.



The special "Expo" section of a large bookstore ("Book City" on Fuzhou Road); author's photograph 2008.

I will not add my voice to the chorus of mockery, which has led to Haibao being compared to everything from a bit of squeezed out toothpaste to a Smurf with Chinese characteristics to a condom. Yes, this figure, whose image is also now showing up on city maps, has an odd look to him, but the historian in me is aware that what are now the most revered icons linked to World's Fairs of the past were often denigrated early on—this was true of the Ferris Wheel created for Chicago's great 1839 Columbia Exposition and even the Tour Eiffel built for the Paris Expo of 1889—and there is a chance that he appeals to children more than adults. What I do want to note about Haibao, though, is that the most memorable thing about him other than his shape is his color—a striking shade of pale blue.

This is, moreover, no accident, for the "hai" in

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his name is the same one meaning "sea" that makes up half of Shanghai's name. And here is how a promotional leaflet I picked up on my recent trip to the city describes the meaning of Haibao's hue: "The blue color represents many elements—such as the ocean, the future and technology—which are consistent with characteristics of the host city." If the Olympics that just passed give us any cue as to what to expect from the Shanghai Expo to come, we can expect to see red flags fluttering in many key venues, but there is no doubt that in this multicolored metropolis, there will be plenty of blue to catch the eye as well in 2010.

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