



SHANGHAI DISPATCH

'City of Parasites' or 'Glamorous Metropolis?' China's Cosmopolitan Contradiction

Shanghai's many layers of architecture, culture and politics have made it a difficult fit for the Communist Party's preferred narrative of Chinese victimhood and Western sins.

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The Shanghai History Museum, housed in the former Shanghai Race Club.

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Reporting from Shanghai

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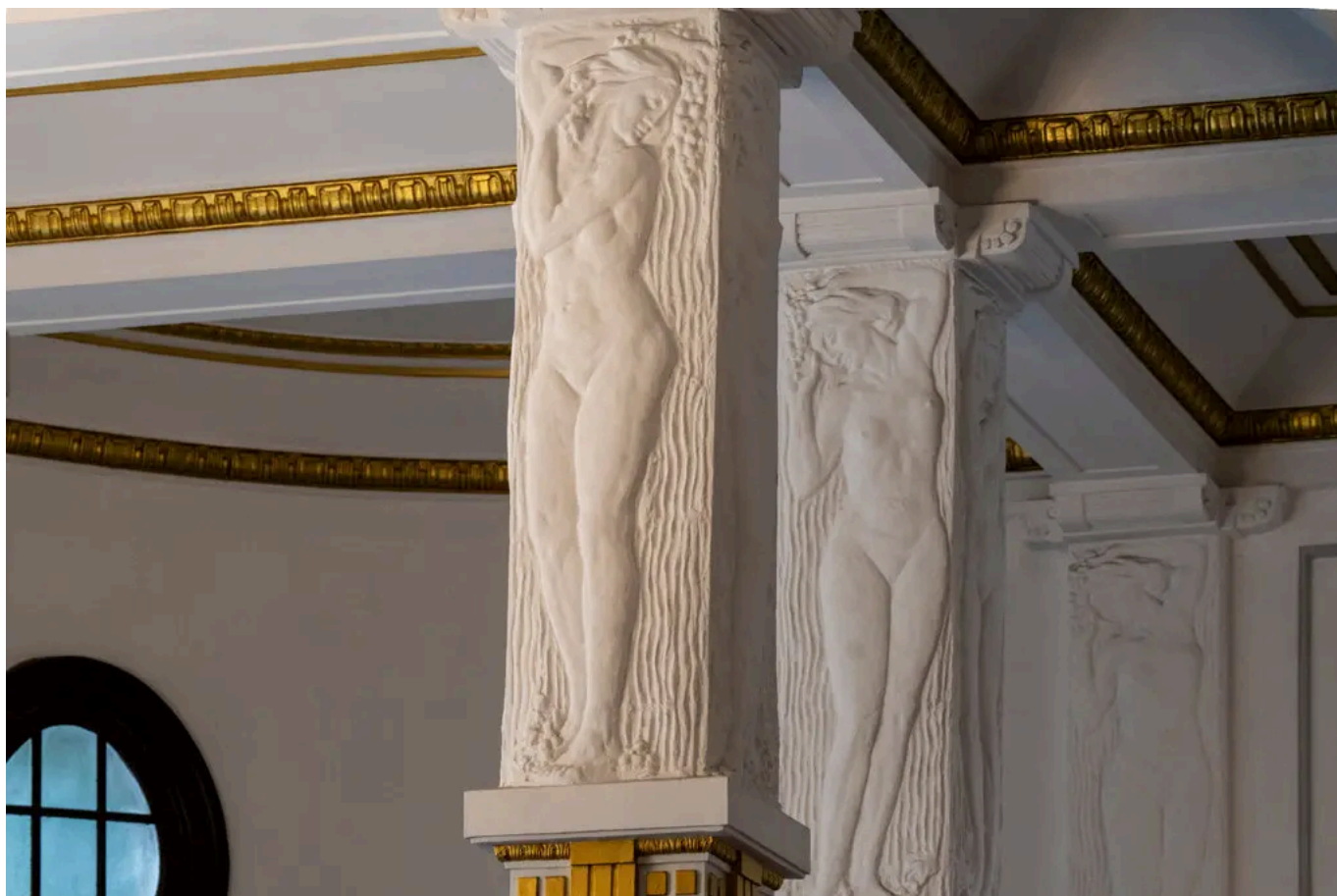
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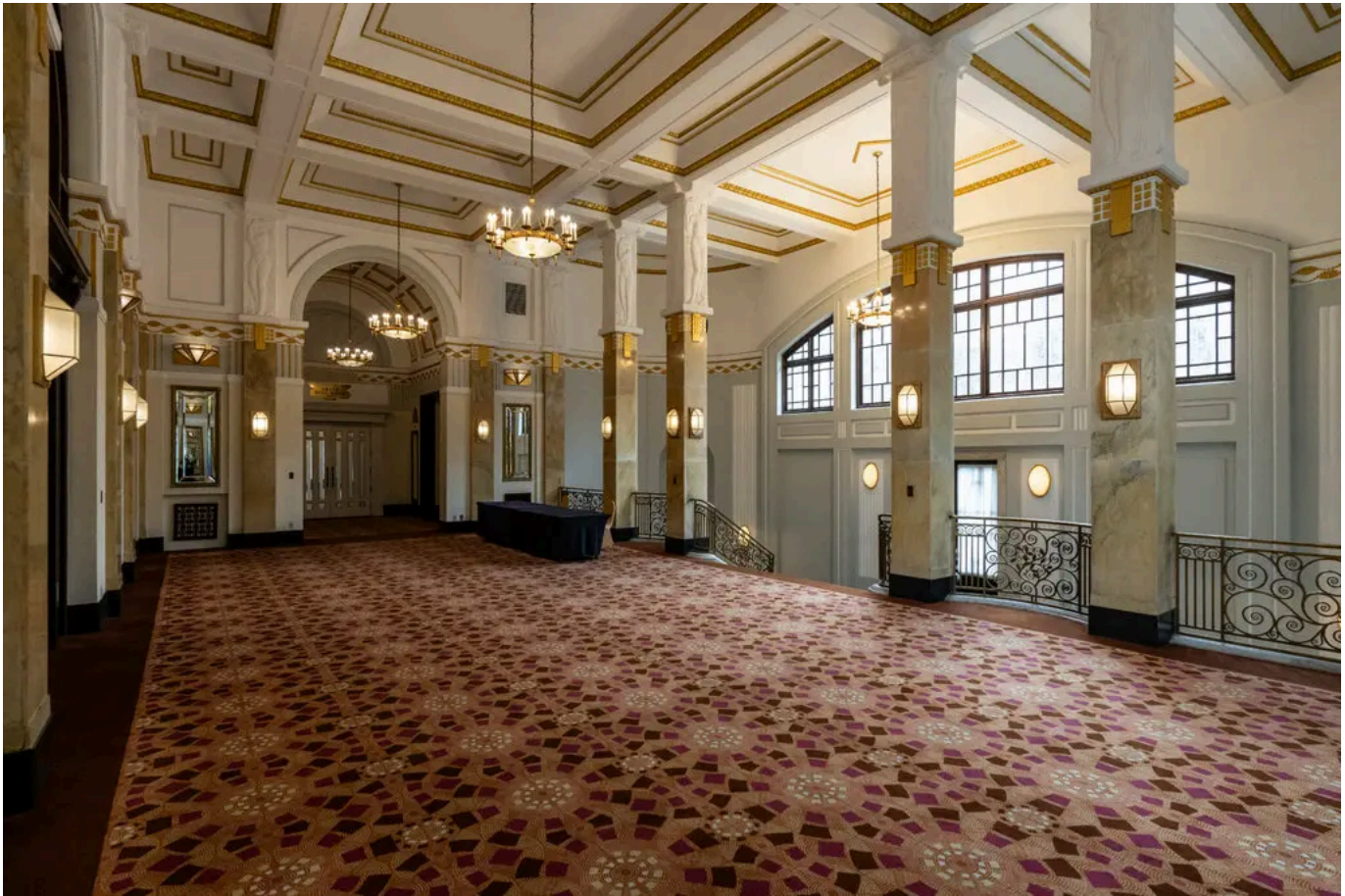
The nude women first appeared a century ago outside the ballroom, with the opening of the Cercle Sportif Français, the first building in Shanghai to introduce Art Deco design to a city that quickly became one of the world's premier showcases of modern architecture.

The nudes, molded in plaster on pillars at the top of a grand staircase, vanished after Mao Zedong's conquest of China in 1949, hidden behind screens put up by prudish commissars scornful of what they saw as Shanghai's shameful corruption by decadent imperialists.

They were still covered when I first visited Shanghai more than 45 years ago, but came back into view shortly afterward as a new leadership in Beijing, headed by Deng Xiaoping, pushed China to modernize by opening up to the world.



The nude female figures molded in plaster at the former Cercle Sportif Français.



The defunct social club is now part of the Okura Garden Hotel.

In Shanghai — China's most cosmopolitan city, but also a hotbed of xenophobic politics during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution — the change of direction in the 1980s forced a rethink of history and its message for the future. While Shanghai embodied everything the Communist Party hated — capitalism and imperialism — it also showcased China's early mastery of modern ways.

“Shanghai was never a foreign city, just China's most foreign-influenced and most modern city,” said Wu Jiang, a professor of architecture at Tongji University.

The city's many different layers of architecture, culture and politics, however, have made it a difficult fit for the Communist Party's preferred narrative of Chinese victimhood and Western sins, especially when it comes to deciding what stays and what goes.

Professor Wu, who served for five years as deputy director of Shanghai's municipal planning bureau in the early 2000s, pushed to preserve old buildings that many in government saw as uncomfortable reminders of unwelcome foreign intrusions.

“People kept asking me: ‘What are you doing? Why do you want to preserve all this imperialist culture?’” he said. “History does not depend on whether you like it or not. You can’t just get rid of everything that makes you feel bad.”

He recalled initial resistance to any slowing of [the frenzy of demolition](#) that started in the 1990s to make way for the shopping malls and high-rise towers that now dominate the urban landscape.

Art Deco architectural jewels, preserved during the Mao era largely by economic stagnation, were suddenly under threat. Some survived, however, helped by a growing recognition of their value as an important part of Shanghai’s unique character — and of the role played by Chinese, not just foreigners, in creating them.

“Some of Shanghai’s most iconic and creative Art Deco building were created by Chinese architects,”

said Tina Kanagaratnam, a longtime Shanghai resident from Singapore and a founder of Historic Shanghai, an organization that has worked to safeguard the city’s architectural heritage.

The Majestic Theater, which has screened movies and hosted shows of Chinese opera and Western ballet since the 1940s, was designed by Robert Fan. The Yangtze Hotel, an Art Deco gem that hosted the city’s first all-Chinese jazz band in the 1930s and is now an upscale boutique hotel, was designed by Paul Li Pan.

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The Majestic Theater was designed by Robert Fan, a Chinese architect.



The Yangtze Hotel, a Chinese-designed, Art Deco gem that hosted Shanghai's first all-Chinese jazz band.

Westerners enjoyed immense privileges in foreign-run enclaves like the French Concession, site of the Cercle Sportif, a now-defunct social club. Seized by the state after the 1949 revolution, the property became an exclusive retreat for model workers and Communist Party functionaries. Mao used its swimming pool, since demolished, during his visits to Shanghai from Beijing. (Today the building is part of the Japanese, luxury Okura Garden Hotel.)

Foreigners, however, were always a minuscule minority. They accounted for only around 1 percent of the population of a city with around six million residents by the time Mao's troops arrived. And most were far less wealthy than the Chinese tycoons who controlled some of Shanghai's most lucrative textile factories, flour mills and banks. Chinese built and owned the four biggest department stores.

How to reconcile what Rao Shushi, an early leader of the municipal party apparatus, described as Shanghai's pre-1949 role as "city of parasites" and "foreign adventurers," with its role as a breeding ground for Chinese talent, entrepreneurial flair and creativity — and also the Chinese Communist Party — has been a long struggle.

The city has two separate municipal public history museums, each telling a somewhat different story. The Shanghai Municipal History Museum at the base of the [Oriental Pearl Tower](#), a tribute to modernity built in the 1990s, celebrates the city as a melting pot where “the merging of traditional Chinese cultural spirit and Western modern civilization made Shanghai a glamorous metropolis.”



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A display of a courtroom trial presided over by a Chinese judge and a Western judge, the system used in Shanghai's concession areas.

Also known as the Shanghai Urban History and Development Museum, it nods at the dire poverty and exploitation that afflicted parts of the Chinese population, but mostly avoids bombastic “patriotic” messaging. Citing an influx of foreign cigarettes as an example of how Westerners inadvertently spurred China’s economic development, one display explains that “foreign competition for the market compelled domestic industry to rise up with spirit to face the adversary.”

Among those who thrived was Rong Zongjing, a flour magnate and cigarette producer whose former mansion, originally built by a German but extensively remodeled by an early 20th-century Chinese architect, has now been [lavishly restored by the Italian luxury brand Prada](#). It is used for fashion shows and exhibitions, and has a chic cafe popular with young Chinese eager for a taste of what they imagine as the elegance of old Shanghai.



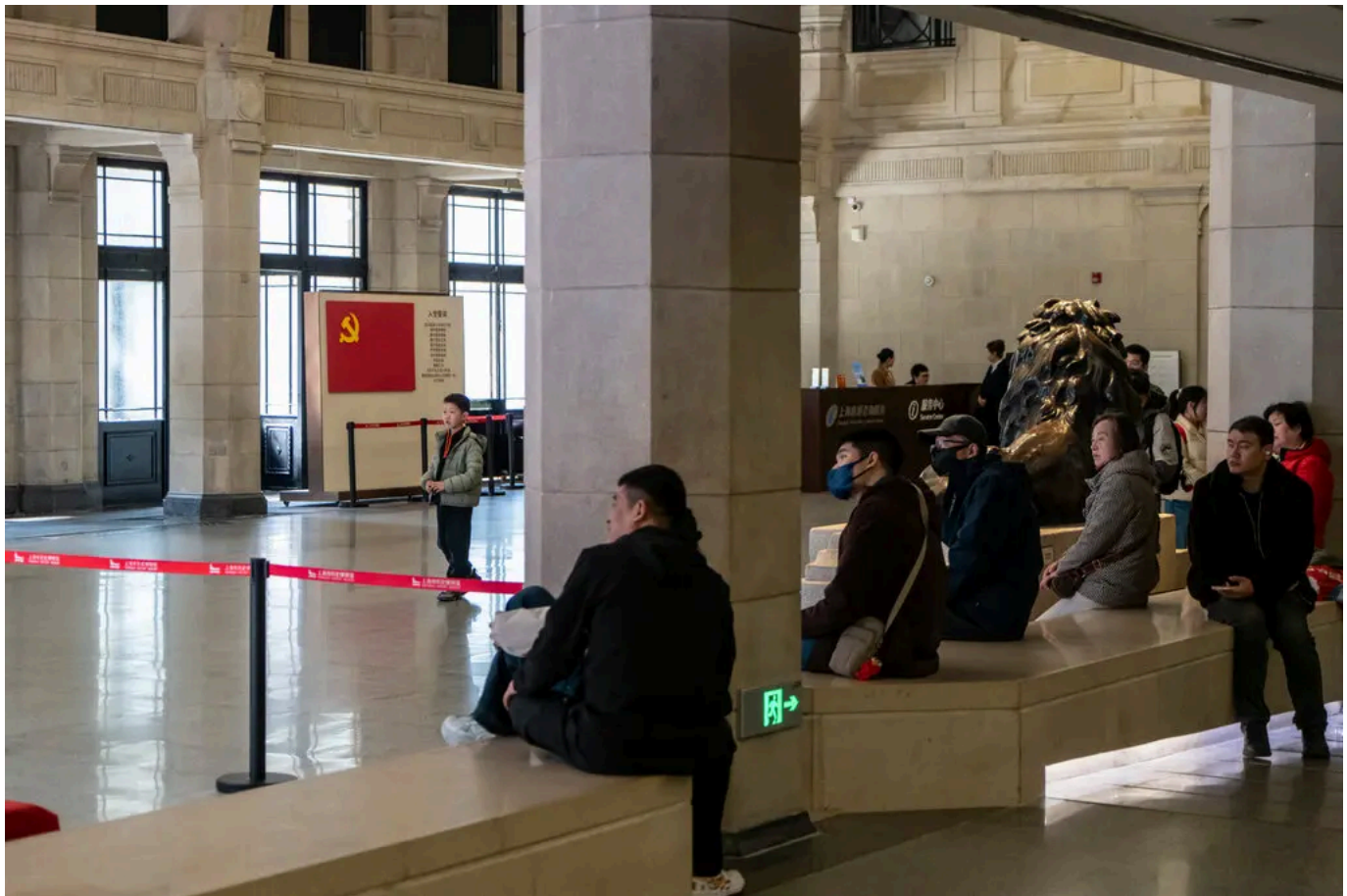
A cafe at the former mansion of Rong Zongjing.



A former mansion has now been restored by the Italian luxury brand Prada.

The glamour of that era gets short shrift in the Shanghai History Museum, housed in the former Shanghai Race Club, once a bastion of foreign privilege next to the city's long vanished hippodrome. Merged in 2017-18 with the Shanghai Revolutionary History Museum [in response to an ideological tightening](#) ordered by China's current leader, Xi Jinping, this museum leans heavily into politics, decrying foreign misdeeds and the suffering of Chinese under foreign oppression.

That same reading of history suffuses a must-see stop on China's Red Tourism trail — the French Concession building where Soviet agitators, Mao and a dozen other Chinese Communists met in 1921 to hold the Party's founding national congress. The message hammered home here is that Shanghai “suffered greatly under the colonial yoke,” subjected to “plundering, imperialism and exploitation.”



The Shanghai History Museum was reconfigured to make it more “patriotic” in response to an ideological tightening ordered by China's current leader, Xi Jinping.



A painting depicting the 1949 revolution.

Anti-foreign sentiment reached its peak in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution, when Red Guards ransacked the homes of residents suspected of harboring fondness for the old days. Any connection to the West — even possession of a piano or foreign books — invited beatings, sometimes to death.

The trauma of that decade, however, does not feature in any of the city's museums or exhibition halls. Red Guard slogans sometimes resurface, briefly, when bulldozers move in to demolish old buildings, dislodging layers of paint and plaster covering up now-taboo calls for merciless struggle against class enemies and imperialists.



Murals with scenes from the city's different historical periods adorn buildings in a neighborhood emptied of people and awaiting redevelopment.



An older neighborhood that is slated for redevelopment.

Wang Hongwen, a radical textile worker elevated to the rank of China's vice chairman by Mao during the Cultural Revolution, is never mentioned, despite his being Shanghai's most prominent representative in the national leadership for years. His former workplace, the Shanghai No. 17 Cotton Textile Mill, a center of Cultural Revolution fervor, has been redeveloped and became the [Shanghai Fashion Center](#), an outlet mall.

With China's economy cooling amid a prolonged property crisis, the frenzied destruction of Shanghai's past has slowed. The city government also put a brake on willy-nilly demolition by drawing up a long list of protected heritage sites.

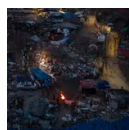
A big problem today, Professor Wu said, is the decay of districts slated for redevelopment during boom years but which, emptied of residents to make way for bulldozers, are crumbling because developers ran out of money. "Slow decay is sometimes worse than demolition," he said.

[Andrew Higgins](#) is the East and Central Europe bureau chief for The Times based in Warsaw, on temporary assignment in Shanghai.

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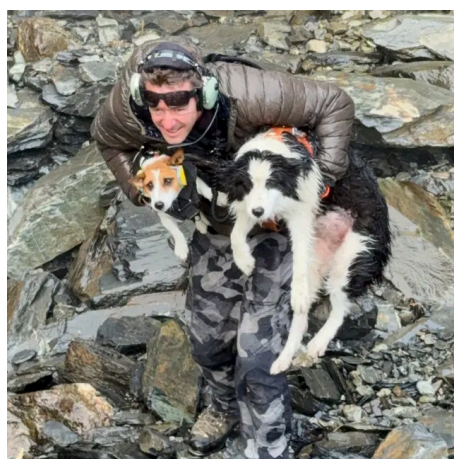
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