

文明城市 Cultured City

FORWARD TO THE PAST: THE POLITICS OF REAPPEARANCE IN SHANGHAI

Words and Photography by Steven Lewis

Why does Shanghai seem to celebrate its past—traditional, colonial, socialist, and reform-era—as much as it glorifies its illustrious future? Hong Kong scholar Ackbar Abbas offers an explanation for why in Shanghai the image of the past is the key to understanding the vision of the future, and here I provide photographs of advertisements, political posters, and signs collected from Shanghai's streets, neighborhoods and subways in November 2011 to test his theory.

“Let me offer the following hypothesis: Preservation in Shanghai is motivated by something quite different from the usual pieties about ‘cultural heritage,’ which, given the city’s colonial past, can only be ambiguous. It is motivated more by anticipations of a new Shanghai to rival the old than simply by nostalgia for the past... This paradox of the past as the future’s future also throws a particular light on Shanghai’s urban development, which, like preservation, takes on a special quality: Shanghai today is not just a city on the make with the new and brash everywhere—as might be said more aptly of Shenzhen, for example. It is also something more subtle and historically elusive: the city as re-make, a shot-by-shot reworking of a classic, with the latest technology, a different cast, and a new audience. Not ‘Back to the Future’ but ‘Forward to the Past.’

*...In this context, the state’s interest in preservation, via municipal policy, makes a lot of sense. Not only is preservation well within the competence of the state; it is also a way by which the state can enter the global market through promoting the city’s past—that is, through the heritage industry. It is an implicit assertion of the state’s involvement in and contribution to the future development of Shanghai—a way of mediating the need of the state for legitimacy and the demand of the private sector for profitability. By a strange twist, the state’s interest in preservation is an assertion that it is still a player in the new global game. Hence, the entirely different relation to preservation in Hong Kong and Shanghai: in the one, ad hoc and linked to anxieties about the city’s disappearance; in the other, state-planned and related to the city’s reappearance as a soi-disant ‘City of Culture.’” — Ackbar Abbas, “Cosmopolitan De-Descriptions: Shanghai and Hong Kong,” *Public Culture*, 12, No. 3 (2000). 文明*



OLD HUANGPU

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居民要人进家门，消防提示

防火提示
火灾时有发生，人们应经常注意
老人家中切忌，在楼道内堆放
杂物外出时，家中应关好门窗
防火人进家门，防火人进家门



莫让生人进家访
莫让鱼杆进门窗

NANJING ROAD [facing] Giant text "Build a Beautiful District" competes with giant figures in commercial ads on the city's main shopping street.
OLD HUANGPU Even the Socialist-era political ideals are maintained nostalgically. Decades of sub-district signs and plaques attached to working-class homes promote the ideals of socialist community: serving the people, collective security, and public safety.



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FORWARD TO THE PAST



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和谐

你我同创!

新华社区（街道）党工委
新华街道办事处

SUMMER2011.06.18

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FORWARD TO THE PAST [preceding spread and facing page] Chinese Communist Party district and sub-district committees place large public-service ads on the walls around construction sites, placing Socialist slogans above photographs of both Shanghai's colonial-era buildings on the Bund and modern single-family homes and apartment towers, extolling families of 市民 (city residents) to "chip in to build a 文明城区 (cultured district)." Here, Shanghai's official imaginary of the future holds great wonders: picnics for families with two children, windmills in urban parks, jet planes and clouds in the shape of the Motherland! YOUTH In the commercial advertisements of Shanghai's rapidly growing subterranean subway system, contained in large backlit billboards that sit across the tracks from the train platforms, Youth is King. Young folk hawk cosmetics and hip clothing, high-tech headphones, books on Amazon, and the finest white linens, while Korean male pop icons dimple on demand to demonstrate the suppleness of their adorable cheeks (thank you Mentholatum!).

SUBWAY ADVERTISEMENT IMAGES COURTESY OF THE RICE EPHEMERA PROJECT AND SUPPORTED BY THE HENRY LUCE FOUNDATION OF NEW YORK. SEE ARCHIVE OF IMAGES ONLINE AT SCHOLARSHIPPRICE.EDU/HANDLE/1911.739097