This is a book about the city of Shanghai in the 1930s as a cultural matrix of Chinese modernity. In contrast to popular Western lore about the city, I take an insider’s point of view by reading primarily Chinese materials—literary journals, newspapers, as well as works by individual authors and scholars—in order to construct a picture of Shanghai’s urban culture at the height of its splendor. Such a topic would seem natural for a scholarly research project, but it proved more difficult than I first expected. When I first began exploring the subject some twenty years ago, I realized that it was all but an ideological taboo in China, while scholarship in modern Chinese studies in Western academia was preoccupied with rural villages.

This rural preoccupation is perfectly understandable, for China is still a predominantly rural country. In the modern Chinese literary imagination ever since the May Fourth period (1917–1923), patriotic sentiments invariably stemmed from, and were envisioned as, an ethos of the countryside, with the country (guojia) symbolically invoked as the "native land" of villages (xiangtu). Shanghai, the largest city in China and, as the hub of the publishing industry, the place where most of this literature was produced and circulated to the country at large, was cast in a negative light as a bastion of decadence and evil—the consequence of a long history of Western imperialism. As the treaty port par excellence—the largest of a dozen treaty ports on the Chinese coast—Shanghai became a constant reminder of a history of national humiliation.
Although the unequal treaties with the Western powers had been largely abolished by the mid-1940s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which had been founded in Shanghai in 1921, perpetuated this negative image and made it into a major target by leading a revolution that sought to "mobilize the countryside to surround the cities." Since Shanghai was also the financial headquarters of the Nationalist (Guomindang) regime, it became, in a way, the CCP's worst enemy. After the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the material conditions of Shanghai deteriorated as its population continued to grow. Politically the city had always played second fiddle to Beijing, the nation's new capital. And for all the talk in literary circles about the "competition" between the Beijing school (Jingpai) and Shanghai school (Haipai) before Liberation, the culturally and politically hegemonic status of Beijing remained unchallenged—at least until recently.

This said, I must confess that Shanghai is a city for which I cherished few fond memories. I first visited the city in 1948 as a child and a refugee from the advancing troops of the People's Liberation Army on the eve of its victory. My strongest impression then was of its streetcars and neon signs lit by electricity. (Born in the rural region of Henan, I had never even seen an electric bulb!) I was also scared of the revolving doors in the hotel where my maternal grandfather lived. One morning I ventured out to buy some meat dumplings at a nearby food stand. On my return I got my ears caught in the fast-moving revolving door, and in a panic I lost all my dumplings—such being my first exposure to Shanghai modernity! The path toward my rediscovery of Shanghai's literary renown was paved in Taiwan and America—an intellectual journey which took nearly thirty years.

In 1949 my family moved to Taiwan, where I grew up and became interested in Western literature. As a sophomore in college I was involved in establishing a small literary journal, Modern Literature (Xiandai wenxue), which launched Taiwan's "modernist" movement in the early 1960s. When our first issue featured the works of Franz Kafka, I had no idea who he was, and I proceeded to translate a learned article on
Thomas Mann for another issue without the vaguest idea of his literary stature. Some twenty years later, when I was asked to write an article on modernism in Taiwanese literature, I began to reflect on this curious state of affairs: How could this brand of "modernism" have been produced in the corridors of an old university building in Taipei by a small group of college sophomores and juniors who could barely read English or any other Western language? Where did we find the works of Kafka, Mann, Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway? (Answer: in the small library of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Taiwan University.) We had made what we considered to be a major "discovery" at a time when High Modernism had already passed its creative prime and entered the American classroom as classics. Did Chinese writers of an earlier generation know about these modern masters when they were still alive—that is, in the period between the two World Wars? My curiosity led me back to Shanghai in order to trace these and other possible antecedents in modern Chinese literary history.

In fact, it was through the timely advice of a former Shanghai resident, C. T. Hsia, that I learned about another literary journal published in the 1930s with a similar name, Xiandai zazhi (Modern magazine; translated by its editor, Shi Zhecun, into French as Les Contemporains). Thus began my long journey toward retracing the footsteps of our literary predecessors—a recherche du temps perdu which brought me back to Shanghai in 1981. I have visited the city half a dozen times since, and each time I was privileged to meet and interview Shi Zhecun himself at his home, and at the Shanghai Municipal Library I was able to plumb the rich collections of literary journals and other rare collections which are not found anywhere abroad. For instance, I took out a copy of Liu Na'ou's Dushi fengjingxian (Scenes of the city) surreptitiously during lunch break (as no material was allowed to leave the library) and had the entire volume photocopied at a nearby copy shop that had just opened—a peculiar form of revenge on my fiasco at the revolving door some thirty years earlier: if I had once lost the dumplings, I now had a copy of a rare book!
Through these early research ventures I became obsessed with an old Shanghai I had remembered as a nightmare but which now emerged on thousands upon thousands of printed pages as a city of great splendor—the very embodiment of Chinese modernity. During my research I also learned that not only had the very English word “modern” entered the modern Chinese vocabulary as a transliteration, *modeng*, coined of course in Shanghai, but, more importantly, the whole gamut of Western literary modernism was known in the 1930s, and was even made quite popular by a number of writers who published translations, essays, and their own creative writings in scores of literary journals. The ways in which they managed to start their small publishing ventures had been quite similar to ours many years later—unplanned haphazard enterprises driven by intellectual curiosity and boundless energy, though not many financial resources, on the part of a small coterie of young novices. (For a detailed description, see Chapter 4.) But the names of these modern writers were either consciously erased or largely forgotten—Shi Zhecun (b. 1905), Liu Na’ou (1900–1939), Mu Shiying (1912–1940), Shao Xunmei (1906–1968), Ye Lingfeng (1904–1975), Eileen Chang (1920–1995), to mention the few who will enter into the present book as primary protagonists. By a happy coincidence, my own research project came at precisely the moment when a few Chinese scholars were beginning to rediscover these writers. Thus I was able to escape possible ideological censure (for doing research on “bourgeois decadence”) and join their scholarly ranks as a pioneer.

But this pioneering status in the early 1980s was soon challenged by a spate of research publications all focused on Shanghai’s urban history and by a resurgence of American scholarly interest in this city. Despite its early start, my research now may seem to lag behind and follow a well-trodden trail of books on various aspects of Shanghai—although I maintain that not much has been written on Shanghai’s urban culture. The real reason for the delay of this research project was the crisis in Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989. As a result of the massacre of demonstrators on June 4, I all but decided to abandon it in
order to focus my energies on the more urgent issues of contemporary Chinese culture over the next few years. But this delay has also been, in scholarly terms, a blessing in disguise, for the publications of other scholars working on similar topics have fertilized the field which once looked so barren when I first ventured into it. Their work has also helped me to rethink some of my earlier ideas and to form my own framework. Still, thorny interpretive problems remain, which have been complicated by the recent “theoretical” turn in modern Chinese literature and cultural studies, in which the display of textual strategies, virtuoso readings, and other forms of interventions and subversions—all based on recent Western theories—seem to have taken over the task of research itself. All a scholar needs to do, it seems, is to read a few “privileged” texts!

I am by no means averse to theory; in fact I welcome it as intellectual challenge. The work of Walter Benjamin has proved especially relevant to my endeavor, as my final reflections in Chapter 1 clearly show. But I still prefer to do my work “from the ground up” by establishing first a context of Shanghai’s urban culture before I attempt to reconfigure the texts into a meaningful set of readings. Owing to the rich materials I have gathered (both written and visual) and present to my intended readers—both academics and non-academics—I have chosen to write in an essay-like style and in a language that is not burdened with theoretical density. Contrary to the usual practice of laying out my theoretical arguments in the first chapter, I instead lay out Shanghai’s urban background by a method that combines factual description with my own narration. Each of the other three chapters in Part I takes up an area of “cultural production”—print culture, cinema, and literary journals—which is illustrated with more materials and approached from different interpretive angles. My purpose is to construct an urban cultural context in which the various literary texts discussed in Part II might make more sense. Since most of these texts are not yet translated, hence new and unfamiliar to Western readers, I have included a few long paragraphs of my own translations. In the final part of this book I offer some general reflections and arguments that serve to round off my pic-
ture and bring my story into the late 1990s—to Hong Kong at the time of its “return” to the motherland. If it can be said that 1930s Shanghai has been reincarnated in Hong Kong since the 1950s, I believe that Hong Kong will in turn contribute to the rebuilding of Shanghai into a cosmopolis for the twenty-first century.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of the late Paul Engle (1908–1991), American poet and founding father of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, who taught me how to read Eliot and opened my eyes to true literary cosmopolitanism; and to Hualing Nieh Engle, his beloved wife and co-founder of the International Writing Program at Iowa and herself a distinguished novelist, whose love and concern have sustained me through all these trying years.
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