European Colonial Heritage in Shanghai: Conflicting Practices

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates various heritage-related practices in the city of Shanghai since the end of colonialism. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the dominant approach was to remove the colonial heritage and replace it with a communist narrative of the people and its heroes. The introduction of market socialism in the 1990s led to a revival of the colonial heritage, but in a form that presented the city as a cosmopolitan and consumer-oriented center. The role of the colonial heritage in the dramatic change in the cityscape since the 1990s has often been viewed as nostalgic. This article analyses nostalgia as a reframing of the colonial heritage, in which it reappears as the design of communist extravagance or “conspicuous communism.” Through an analysis of the newly opened Shanghai History Museum, this article demonstrates that the global design strategy imposed on the cityscape is losing momentum and is now being challenged by a more robust narrative of a city formed more by communism than colonialism. The museum clearly reveals a tension between removing and reframing colonial heritage. Colonial heritage re-emerging in a positive way is rare, but may be found in a fascination with the darker and unruly forces of colonial Shanghai, or with objects that tend to disrupt the dominant approaches of removal and reframing.

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Introduction
In September 2019, when the Shanghai flagship store of the Japanese retail company Muji announced a jogging event called “City walker—Turn right at red lights in the French Concession,” this initiative stirred up heated reactions on Chinese social media. Muji had to cancel the event and apologize for referring to the area where it was supposed to take place as “The French Concessions” (Zhou 2019). Although travel agencies and travel guides often advertise “The French Concession” as a tourist attraction, the reaction to Muji’s event indicates that Shanghai’s colonial history remains a sensitive subject.

The French Concession, together with the International Concession, is part of the European colonial history of Shanghai. The concessions were imposed on the Chinese empire following its defeat in the first Opium War in 1842. Besides demarcating areas directly
under their control, foreign powers also forced the Qing dynasty to concede extraterritoriality to foreigners, to open Shanghai and other port cities to foreign trade, and to guarantee to foreigners the right to navigate along the coast and in the interior of the country (Chan 1977, 257). This system is often referred to as “semi-colonialism,” a concept that describes when countries, despite nominally preserving their juridical independence, are dominated by imperialist powers (Mommsen and Osterhammel 1986, 296–297). This semi-colonial arrangement led to British, French, and American legal and political control of extended areas of Shanghai (Goodman and Goodman 2012). The concessions became settlements for Europeans who opened businesses and acquired properties. These activities expanded rapidly, and turned Shanghai into a financial center and cultural hub under foreign influence, until the Japanese occupation in 1937.

The period of foreign interference in China is still referred to as “the century of humiliation” in official historical writing. However, following the market reforms of the 1990s, the Shanghai government successfully employed its colonial heritage – as the buildings, city spaces, and monuments built between 1842 and 1942 are often described in Western and Chinese literature – to support its political strategy of modernizing and rebranding the city as a booming economic center.

It has become somewhat of a convention to explain the role of colonial heritage in the development of the city as the emergence of a nostalgia for colonialism. There is a rich body of scholarship on the role of colonial nostalgia in Shanghai. Scholars speak of “Shanghai in the 1990s [that] could be rightly called a city bathed in nostalgia” (Yu, Chen, and Zhong 2014, 170). Others note the “the nostalgic caressing of a once-existing modernity” (Wu 2006, 367), of “nostalgia for futures past” (Lagerkvist 2010, 210), and “rhythms of retromodernity” (Lagerkvist 2013), of “a nostalgic imaginary of a glamorous and decadent 1920s and 1930s colonial past” (Pendlebury, Yang, and Law 2018, 23). The concept of nostalgia is often linked to a feeling that evokes a certain past, which serves to correct the present and avoid future uncertainties. This restorative nostalgia yields a past expunged of problems, and provides a retro safety zone adjusted to the present (Boym 2001; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003).

Although most studies of Chinese colonial nostalgia understand it as yielding an imaginary cosmopolitanism bathed in the glamor of colonial times, it is not simply a general feeling for the good old days. Most scholars agree that this nostalgia is linked to a political strategy of rapid urban modernization initiated by the Shanghai government to reboot the city’s financial and political significance (Dai 1997; Lu 2002). This strategy references a cosmopolitan Shanghai of the past, which can justify the massive investments in a new and future Shanghai. For some scholars, colonial nostalgia is linked mainly to urban renovation, which paves the way for “a cosmopolitan, consumption culture” (Yu, Chen, and Zhong 2014, 34), a “glamorous space of conspicuous consumption” (Ren 2008, 4), or even simply to simulations or simulacra that conjure up a false past (Zhang 2018; Law 2012).

There is certainly no doubt that nostalgia is an important element of the practices that emerged in the 1990s, which surround Shanghai’s colonial heritage. However, this article aims to examine these practices through a conceptual grid that broadens the scope of the city’s relationship with the past, as the concept of nostalgia tends to gather quite different attitudes to the past under the same heading. In line with the framework developed by
the ECHOES research project, this article examines colonial-heritage-related practices as formed by four different modalities: removal (Kølvraa 2018a), repression (Kølvraa 2018b), reframing (Knudsen 2018a) and re-emergence (Knudsen 2018b). These four modalities are part of the methodological framework developed by the ECHOES project (Andersen, Knudsen, and Kølvraa 2019) to study practices related to colonial heritage in Europe and in countries formerly colonized by European powers, and determine the various ways that heritage and the relationship to a difficult past are handled. Removal (Kølvraa 2018a) is an effort to break with the past and remove all the traces of it, to reflect a new, anti-colonial imaginary. However, such clean ideological breaks often encounter the problem of covering up the remains of the past that are still present, and leave traces. In that case, it is possible to speak of a heritage that is constantly repressed, and thus is still there (Kølvraa 2018b). On the other hand, reframing directly addresses the past through a deliberate strategy of recontextualization (Knudsen 2018a). In this case, heritage is re-inscribed in new narratives and acquires hybrid meanings, which partly detach it from the past. Finally, a heritage may re-emerge, not as repressed, but through a deliberate effort to use the remains of the past to develop new, future-oriented and interculturally reflexive relations to the countries with a colonizing legacy (Knudsen 2018b).

What follows interprets the various approaches to Shanghai’s European colonial heritage through the abovementioned four modalities. Of the many elements of colonial heritage present in the city, this article concentrates on two history museums – Shanghai’s Urban History and Development Museum (opened in 2001) and the Shanghai History Museum/Shanghai Revolution Museum (opened in 2018) – and on the management of colonial cityscapes (People’s Park, Xintiandi, and Sinan Mansions). Museums are important sites for authorized representations of the past and particularly history museums because they reflect the interpretations of colonialism promoted by the CCP’s municipal authorities at two different points in Shanghai’s history. Taking a close look at their exhibitions allows the tracking of changes that occurred over time in the institutionally supported interpretation of the city’s colonial history, and to analyze the differences and similarities between these narratives and the management of colonial heritage outside the museum walls.

The four modalities tend to follow a historical rhythm determined by the longer history of Shanghai. The establishment of the PRC in 1949 unleashed an anti-colonial and communist remodeling of the city, characterized by the removal of traces of colonialism. The heritage tour of this article begins in Shanghai in an atmosphere of removal. With the shift to market socialism and modernization in the 1990s, colonialism returned as heritage. As shown by means of the exhibition in the Shanghai Urban History and Development Museum, this return cannot simply be defined as nostalgia. The effort to balance the narratives could also be viewed as a form of repression.

The first cracks in the dominant heritage narrative were followed by a more radical shift in modality, following the massive transformation of the cityscape beginning in the late 1990s. These changes led to a significant reframing of colonial heritage, embedded in a new narrative of communist Shanghai. With the new political winds blowing through China since the 2010s, the previously successful reframing strategy seems to face some difficulties, as discussed in the analysis of the newly opened Shanghai History Museum.
Beneath the dominant practices of removal, repression, and reframing, there also are signs that implicitly point to the re-emergence of alternative ways of conceptualizing the historical relationships with Europe.

**Removing Colonial History: Transforming the Shanghai Racecourse into People’s Park**

Since its victory in 1949, the CCP has faced the problem of how to utilize and recontextualize the colonial spaces that dominated Shanghai’s cityscape. In the 1950s, several of the buildings previously owned by foreign companies were appropriated by the new municipal government in an act that signaled the change in political power. However, in some cases, the CCP authorities decided to remold the city’s history by erasing the memory of European colonialism from the landscape. The removal of the former Shanghai racecourse and its transformation into People’s Park is one of the earliest examples of how the Chinese Communist Party appropriated one of the city’s most iconic colonial spaces to promote its political agenda.

The Shanghai racecourse – the third one in the city – was opened in 1862 in today’s Nanjing West Road, and the neoclassical-style Shanghai Race Club House was built in 1934 (SHM/SRM 2018, 29). The racecourse and the Club House were places of leisure, where foreigners and wealthy Chinese gathered to watch the races and gamble. Therefore, the new regime considered these places symbols of foreign privilege, and of the decadence of Chinese society under colonialism.

The process of removing the racecourse and the subsequent transformation of this space into a symbol of the CCP’s triumph over colonialism started in the early 1950s, when Marshal Chen Yi (1901–1972), the first Communist mayor of Shanghai, approved a plan to transform the large racecourse into People’s Park (Braester 2005). In 1951, the Shanghai Museum and the Shanghai Library were moved into the Club House, which, in 1989, was declared a protected cultural space dedicated to educating the population. Between 2000 and 2012 it hosted the Shanghai Art Museum, and in 2015 it was given over to the Shanghai History Museum/Shanghai Revolution Museum (SHM/SRM), which is considered more closely.

By transforming the once exclusive spaces of the racecourse into a public park, the CCP authorities strove to express their commitment to returning to the people the space and the resources that were previously stolen by the ruling classes. Moreover, the conversion of the Club House—a space associated with colonial excess and depravity—into Shanghai’s cultural center epitomized the CCP’s commitment to purge the city of its sinful past, to instead promote socialist education. As the People’s Park, the former racecourse became a green oasis where Shanghai’s citizens came together to relax, to study, or to exercise.

Contemporary practices related to Shanghai’s heritage still commemorate the victory of the CCP, thus erasing the colonial history of this area. A series of signs placed at the main entrances to the park explain that Marshal Chen Yi commissioned landscape expert Cheng Shifu (1907–1988) to design the new People’s Park, giving a distinctive Chinese flavor to the gardens. New statues and monuments commemorating Communist heroes and revolutionary events have also been put up in the park and in its surrounding areas. For instance, the statue of Zhang Side (1915–1944), a Communist soldier killed...
during the Second Sino-Japanese War, welcomes those who enter the Park (Figure 1). The area that leads to the very busy People’s Square metro station is occupied by other Communist monuments. Inaugurated on 13 May 1990, the “Memorial for the May Thirteen Movement” commemorates the workers’ strikes of 1925; while closer to the metro
station, onlookers can admire the sculpture “Eight Good Company of Nanjing Road”, a monument celebrating the soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army who in 1949 helped the community of Nanjing Road (Braester 2005). This high relief was put up in 2012 and refurbished in 2017.

The transformation of the racecourse area into People’s Park exemplifies how, in the 1950s, the municipal authorities strove to remove colonial history from this area, and reposition the city in the history of the Communist revolution. In recent years, this process has been reinforced by the addition of new monuments dedicated to key events in the city’s revolutionary history.

Although the heritage-related practices that shaped, and still shape, People’s Park aim to remove colonial heritage, on the opposite side of Nanjing East Road, the hotels, theaters, and department stores built under colonialism have returned to shine, enticing foreign visitors and businesses as in the old days. Nearby, the Nanjing East Road commercial street attracts consumers as it did in pre-communist Shanghai. Nowadays, People’s Park is an island surrounded by colonial buildings returned to their former glories, emphasizing the impossibility of completely remove all traces of colonial history from the cityscape.

**Repression in the Shanghai Urban History and Development Museum**

After 1949, the PRC barricaded itself against the political and economic interference of the capitalist West, but by the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), capitalism stopped being demonized. In the early 1990s, Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) launched market reforms and declared the beginning of a new era of prosperity for China. Shanghai was selected as one of the main recipients of the foreign investments that played an important role in reconstructing the country’s economy.

The heritage-related policies that marked the 1990s and 2000s reflect the CCP’s need to express its desire to transform Shanghai into one of Asia’s economic centers, and to educate the urban masses in their new role as the citizenry of a future global financial and industrial hub (Lei and Vickers 2015, 219–220). In these years, the city’s colonial heritage stopped being removed as a symbol of foreign oppression, and nostalgia for the colonial became an important aspect of the reconstruction of Shanghai’s history and architecture. In the late 1990s, nostalgic feelings for the colonial past started emerging among Shanghai’s cultural elite, as a reaction to the country’s rapid urbanization and a sign of resistance to the growing importance of consumerism in Chinese society and the destruction of colonial vernacular architecture to give space to high-rise apartment blocks. Although colonial nostalgia originally emerged as a sign of resistance to rising consumerism and to the rapid transformation of Shanghai into a global metropolis, it quickly became a marketable “cultural commodity” through a reframing strategy (Dai 1997, 148). Furthermore, by the early 2000s, the municipal authorities managed to appropriate colonial heritage to promote Shanghai’s return as a center of the globalized world.

The Shanghai Urban History and Development Museum (SHDM), which opened in 2001 on the ground floor of the iconic Oriental Pearl Tower, is one of the better examples of how political ideology and market forces collaborated to employ Shanghai’s colonial heritage to advertise the city as a key financial and cosmopolitan hub. Following the market reforms, history museums in China felt pushed to offer their visitors not only
political education, but also relaxation and entertainment (Denton 2014, 77). Also, as state financial support became less available, local museums became increasingly dependent on private funding and commercial revenue (Bollo and Zhang 2017). The SHDM is a result of these two trends: despite being based on the collection of the Shanghai History Museum (SHM), the SHDM is a commercial enterprise managed by the Shanghai Oriental Group (Duan 2009, 41). The SHM held an exhibition in the 1990s, but it closed owing to a lack of funds. The museum survived as a research institution, and some pieces from its collection were borrowed by the SHDM. When the SHM opened a new exhibition in 2018, the SHDM returned the pieces it borrowed, and replaced them with replicas. Although presented as educational and patriotic, the SHDM is still branded as a tourist attraction.

To attract tourists, the exhibition employs techniques typical of theme parks, such as models of buildings, dioramas, and sound effects (Stanley 2002). The exhibition also downplays political issues and anti-imperialist sentiments, and instead gives space to colonial nostalgia (Denton 2014, 88). The SHDM focuses on the period between the First Opium War and the 1930s, and celebrates Shanghai’s colonial era as a “golden age” (Lei and Vickers 2015, 223).

To manufacture this recollection of an idealized past, the museum tends to repress the most troubling elements of colonial history, such as social questions, ethnic tensions, and inequalities. Nevertheless, the shadows of these issues linger on in the exhibition.

In contrast to other history museums in China, the SHDM avoids mentioning the War against Japan, the rise of communism, or the Civil War (1946–1949), instead concentrating on everyday life in pre-1949 Shanghai. Furthermore, the exhibition does not attempt to portray class oppression or class struggle (Denton 2014, 89–90), instead promoting a vision of a more harmonious society. In the introduction to the museum, Shanghai is presented as “China’s biggest city of migrants where Shanghainese, people from other parts of China and foreigners live together”. The dioramas that occupy most of the exhibition depict the multicultural complexity of Shanghai’s society by presenting people of different ethnicities – Europeans, Chinese, Indians, and so on – interacting in bars, churches, or simply on the street. Social and ethnic tensions are barely described. By repressing difficult topics, the curators promote an image of Shanghai as a wealthy, peaceful, and cosmopolitan city, a representation that fuels the CCP’s promises of rapid economic improvement and upward social mobility for Shanghai’s citizens (Lei and Vickers 2015).

The SDHM’s idealized representation of Shanghai’s past clashes with the previous strategy of removal. However, the museum does not explicitly contradict the earlier management of colonial spaces in the city. For instance, the exhibition supports the CCP’s vision of the racecourse as a place of social inequality (Xiong 2011). The museum exhibits pictures of the former racecourse and its Club House, reproductions of gambling tickets, and even a jockey’s uniform, together with a montage of vintage films that offers visitors a vision of activity at the Shanghai racecourse in the 1930s. The video describes the Race Club as a criminal institution, designed to steal money from Chinese residents deceived by promises of easy riches, a sort of casino where foreign owners always won, and the Chinese always lost.

This portrayal of colonial heritage is consistent with the strategy applied to People’s Square. Also, following the CCP’s dominant narrative, the SHDM makes gambling a
metaphor for colonial decadence and oppression. However, although the commentary added to the historical footage sharply criticizes social inequalities, these black and white images of elegantly dressed people watching the races still conjures up nostalgic feelings for this bygone world.

Although the SHDM exhibition openly criticizes gambling, the presence of other illegal activities, such as prostitution and opium consumption, is repressed. When they appear, they are often repackaged as forms of entertainment. In this way, the museum inspires in visitors a fascination with the “dark side” of Shanghai. The presentation of the woodcut print, “Booming Scene at Shanghai Sima Road” exemplifies this tendency (Figure 5). The bustling road represented in the picture, now Fuzhou Road, was popular at the end of the nineteenth century for its opium dens, gambling houses, and brothels (Ying 1991, 93). The women being transported around are prostitutes on their way to their clients. This image is displayed in a hall titled “Bustling Scene of Shanghai, the Paradise of foreign Adventure,” intended to present Shanghai as a city of pleasure and entertainment. Although prostitution is not mentioned directly, the profession of the women represented in the woodcut is obvious to an attentive viewer. By introducing this image in a gallery dedicated to Shanghai’s entertainments, the exhibition suggests that prostitution was one of the attractions of this adventurous city. This light-hearted representation of the unruly “dark side” of Shanghai may be interpreted as a subtle criticism of the whitewashed image of the city promoted elsewhere by the authorities, but the reframing of prostitution as an urban entertainment may also be understood as a sign of repression, as the curators sidestep the most problematic side of this exploitative enterprise.

In some cases, the exhibition mentions some of the social questions that plagued the city. A diorama shows the poorer city dwellers living in hovels, and another shows the interior of an opium den in which two Chinese men smoke opium, attended by a young girl. The caption that introduces the scene informs us that there were plenty of these dens in Shanghai, and describes the problem of opium smoking as the “gloomy side” of Shanghai life (Figure 2). However, in these cases, too, the museum does not try to contextualize these issues, and avoids presenting them as consequences of colonialism.

The SDHM mostly represses references to social problems to create an idealized vision of Shanghai’s past to celebrate the city’s successful present. Nevertheless, the museum’s whitewashing of life during colonialism, and its attempt to turn prostitution and opium smoking into intriguing aspects of the city, are unsuccessful. Despite efforts to marginalize them, social questions reappear, and haunt the nostalgic narrative promoted by the CCP’s authorities in the early 2000.

This whitewashed interpretation of colonial history stands in opposition to communist anti-colonial thought. Meanwhile, however, in other spaces in the city, the heritage of colonialism and the history of Communist Liberation were merged to create a new narrative of conspicuous communism.

Reframing Colonial Heritage: Conspicuous Communism

The large-scale Xintiandi renovation project in the Taipingqiao area of Shanghai’s Luwan district, was one of the first efforts by the local government to connect urban
modernization with heritage politics. The planning of this neighborhood began in 1996, with an agreement between the local government and the Hongkong-based company, Shui On Group. It was based on the idea of renovating the traditional shikumen houses that were built by the French authorities in the 1920s and 1930s to accommodate increasing migration from the countryside (He 2007). The renovation project, which went on from 1997 to 2001, turned this formerly densely crowed neighborhood – which some scholars called a “slum” (Ren 2008) – into Xintiandi, one of Shanghai’s most fashionable shopping areas. Typically, Xintiandi is viewed as the prime example of colonial nostalgia being used by the authorities as part of a strategy to justify its global and futuristic
ambitions in the wake of the national reform policies (Yu, Chen, and Zhong 2014; He 2007; Lu 2002; Ren 2008). By renovating shikumen houses from the concession period and turning the district into a shopping area, heritage policy could be added to the ambitious modernization plans for Shanghai (Huang 2008). However, the links between the city’s “glamorous colonial past” and the actual shopping area surrounding the two blocks of shikumen houses are quite tenuous, and reveal a strongly “designed ideology” (Pan 2011, 131), which adds a global design approach to older narratives of former grandeur and of communist modernization (Non 2012). This has led scholars to speak of Xintiandi as mainly a “commodification of space” (Huang 2008, 233), as “architectural ornaments” (Non 2012, 151) or as “a theme park” (Lu 2002, 53).

Xintiandi has become a hotspot for the wealthy, for Shanghai’s middle class, for Western expats, and tourists. In that sense, the conspicuous consumption evident here is presenting a Shanghai – and more generally a China – which is parallel to that of most modern cities and societies in the Western world. The middle class as consumer becomes the dedicated agent of the new market socialism. The colonial legacy is transformed into a pure consumer experience. There are only a few references to the colonial history of the place, or to history in general. The little museum in one of the shikumen houses, funded by the Shui On Group, mainly presents a story of comfortable middle-class Shanghai life in the 1930s. Next to this museum is the Museum of the First National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which plays a crucial role in linking Shanghai with the heroic history of Chinese communism. The exhibition in the shikumen house where the CCP came into existence in 1921 presents us with a story of dedicated communists gathering under the leadership of Mao. Through the museum, and especially through the many Chinese tourists who display their patriotic feelings in front of it, Xintiandi is also inscribed in the communist narrative. The museum is the highlight of the red tourism track in Shanghai.

On the one hand, the museum seems detached from the less-historically-inscribed shops and restaurants across the street from it. It signals a memory politics that is strongly anti-colonialist. The tourists visiting the museum display patriotism, not conspicuous consumption. On the other hand, the renovation project, with its manifestly designed ideology, reaches out to the other side of the street, to show another version of communism. The street is a visible sign of communist memory politics’ ambivalence about communist heroism and fashionable modernization. The effort to bridge this ambivalence is what this article calls “conspicuous communism.” The term plays on Thorstein Veblen’s famous expression, “conspicuous consumption,” as a demonstration of status through the display of “wasteful” goods for the leisure class in a modern, industrialized society (Veblen 1973). Several observers have highlighted the conspicuous nature of the architectural designs in the renovation of these colonial heritage sites, and view it as a loss of former meanings. This article instead sees conspicuous consumption as an extra layer – in line with the concept of designed ideology (borrowed from Lü Pan 2011 – added to the strategy developed by the city authorities to be frontrunners in the modernization of communism. Thus, conspicuous communism perform an ideal of wealth – or of waste, in Veblen’s terms – that demonstrates the global superiority of China, and of Shanghai in China. It is exactly for the sake of this ideal that the reframing of colonial heritage plays a prominent role.
The ideal of conspicuous communism demands that something be silenced or repressed. At Xintiandi, there is no reference to the demolition that preceded the huge renovation projects. This silence is part of a more general repression of memories of communist Shanghai before the economic reforms. Industrial Shanghai, with its working class crammed into old houses, or in housing next to the factories, is remarkably absent from the heritage landscape. This is not the case with colonialism. Colonial heritage is not being repressed. It is present in deluxe designer versions in Xintiandi, Sinan Mansion, and other areas. It is present in the more than 500 officially recognized heritage-architecture buildings in the former French concession. Typically, plaques on each building give information about the year the building was completed, the architectural style (for instance French Renaissance style garden residence), the date on which it received heritage status, and sometimes, the name of a prominent resident. More information about former residents or style is also provided through QR codes on the signage.

However, explaining this heritage as simply a form of nostalgia is problematic. The link to the past appears too sanitized to elicit any emotional feelings towards the past. In the official heritage-related policy, the link to the colonial past is weak. The many heritage sites are disconnected from their colonial past, and reduced to emblems of architectural styles. They simply indicate fashionable architectural diversity, which seems to fit nicely with the government’s design ideology. References to colonialism emerge only in a designed form, either as windows to global modernity, or explicitly, as commodities for sale in fancy luxury stores. The famous image of the Shanghai girl – the icon of Shanghai’s cosmopolitan modernity at the intersection of East and West before 1949 – is now for sale in the many shops that attract tourists and Shanghai’s urban residents alike. Colonial heritage is not exactly erased from the Former French Concessions. It is there abundantly, but always reframed as something that symbolizes the highly designed version of global Shanghai, with its conspicuous consumption.

Sinan Mansions and Sinan Open Air Museum, both on Sinan Road, formerly the Rue Massenet of the French Concessions, are an approximately ten-minute walk from Xintiandi (Figure 3). The museum and the mansions are part of an ambitious renovation project launched in 1999. The area has a colonial history of urban planning. It was developed by the French authorities beginning in 1912 to meet the nouveau riches, politicians, and cultural personalities’ desire for elegant houses in the city. Chinese celebrities and rich Europeans moved to the neighborhood, which became a hotspot for cultural life in the concessions. After 1949, it continued to be home to Chinese intellectuals who supported the CCP.

Sinan Road was carefully selected by the Shanghai authorities for a grandiose demonstration of the city’s cultural importance in the twentieth first century. The major renovations were completed in 2010, just in time for the Shanghai World Expo. The area was transformed into the historical neighborhood now known as Sinan Mansions, covering 70,000 square meters, almost half of which is covered by buildings that include a luxury hotel, boutiques, apartments, and mansions. In December 2016, the compound became Sinan Open Air Museum, which now included a gallery that provided visitors with historical information. The purpose of turning the area into a museum is clearly to highlight its colonial heritage. The gallery gives information about famous residents and visitors from the time of the concessions. A fifteen-minute video describes the history of neighborhood in a blatantly nostalgic way. Visitors are told that “the history
is never too far away, and the future has arrived.” The video states that by the colonial period, this area was one of the most luxurious in Shanghai, and goes on to present reenactments of upper-class life in what is called “1930 style.” The nearby shops provide visitors with fancy clothes and haircuts à la Great Gatsby. Visitors interviewed in the video are enchanted by being “taken back in time.” An American travel writer talks vigorously about the fascinating mix of periods. Scholars from Tongji University who served as scientific advisers talk about the meticulous reconstruction of the Western-style garden houses. One of the posters informs visitors of the literary roots of the place, and of the century-long relationship between the family of French diplomat and writer, Paul Claudel, and Sinan Road. Since 2017, an art festival with up to one hundred live performances has taken place here every year in May (Qi 2019).

The whole project at Sinan Road is swathed in a thick layer of nostalgia, from the reenactments with French chansons played on accordion, to the scientific reconstruction of the Western-style garden houses. The constant mention of times gone by – a phrase used in the video – and of the cultural spirit impregnating the renovated houses leave no doubt about the desire to relate the contemporary cultural scene in Shanghai to a glorious past of cultural blending in the French concessions. However, there are significant omissions in the narrative. For instance, there are no reminders of the colonial context of the 1930s style, and nothing is said about the reasons for the existence of Western-style houses in the middle of Shanghai. There is no mention of the conditions behind the blending of cultures. The museum/mansions present a symbolic reduction of the
concessions to high culture in the form of architecture and literature. Also, there are only a few traces of post-1949 history. Visitors are left with the impression that high culture—embodied by the Chinese intellectuals living in on Sinan Road—continued unproblematically after 1949. But visitors need go only few hundred meters further down Sinan Road to encounter communist heritage, in the villa where Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) headed the Shanghai CCP office in 1946–47. This villa, which was turned into a memorial in 1979, is one of the central hubs of the red tourist trail in the city. The same is true of the huge Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) residence and museum further up the road. In fact, Sinan Mansions are sandwiched between these two highlights of Shanghai’s communist heritage.

In contrast to Xintiandi, the colonial and the communist narratives do not intersect directly at Sinan Road. In the museum/mansions, the nostalgia of high culture and “1930 style” are explicitly linked to luxury consumption. Visitors are persuaded to reenact the past as consumers in the luxury shops at the center of Sinan Mansions, in restaurants such as Aux Jardins Massenet, or, for those few who can afford it, Hotel Massenet. Residents can enjoy the fenced-off nostalgia in their vastly expensive domiciles next to the commercial area. There are hardly any signs of repression in the discourse surrounding this site, which proposes a rather blunt reframing of the colonial heritage as a narrative of high culture, adding culture to the cosmopolitan nostalgia promoted by the authorities. This add-on to their futurist visions has been very visible since the launch of the impressive world expo in 2010, and may also be seen in the line of new museums along the Huangpu River south of the Bund, now termed the West Bund. This reframing of colonial heritage is far from the practices of removal supported by the communist narrative of humiliation. In places such as Xintiandi and Sinan Mansions, criticism of colonialism is hard to find. Critics are mainly concerned about excessive gentrification. As one blogger wrote on the English website, The Shanghaiist: “this is going to be a Xintiandi for people too rich for Xintiandi” (Shangailaine 2018). Along the same lines, a blogger on Smart Shanghai.com did not mince his words: “Now that it’s been cleaned up, the houses can finally be returned to their original owners: The Rich” (St. Cavish 2010).

The Shanghai History Museum/Shanghai Revolution Museum: Reviving the City’s “Communist Spirit”

In the 2000s, the Xintiandi and Sinan Mansions gentrification projects employed reframing strategies to support the CCP’s plan to resurrect Shanghai’s capitalist and cosmopolitan spirit. During these years, social and ideological changes fostered the deterioration of Chinese revolutionary history museums, which survived, but in a state of crisis (Denton 2014, 75–6). Recently, however, revolutionary museums have been enjoying a renaissance. The Shanghai History Museum/Shanghai Revolution Museum (SHM/SRM) epitomizes this new trend. Its exhibition shows a renewed tendency to remove colonial nostalgia, and to instead revive the communist spirit of Shanghai. Although the museum does not support a return to Maoist ideology, the narrative it promotes strikes a balance between the conspicuous communism promoted by previous heritage projects, and the strong resurgence of nationalism that followed Xi Jinping’s ascent to power.

In November 2015, the Shanghai Municipal committee decided to open a Shanghai History Museum jointly with the Shanghai Revolution Museum, in the former Racecourse Club House (Figure 4). The collections of the two museums have been merged to create
one permanent exhibition, which opened in the spring of 2018. The establishment of the new SHM is strongly political. The museum at the Pearl Tower not only lost the privilege to present the city’s history, and was obliged to return items it borrowed from the SHM, but the merger between the Shanghai History Museum and the Shanghai Revolution Museum heralded a resurgence of the narrative of communist Shanghai. According to the vice director of the SHM, the merger with the Revolutionary Museum followed the Municipal Committee’s directive to “revive the Communist spirit [of the city]” (pers. comm. Dec. 4, 2018). The fact that the SHM/SRM was reopened in People’s Park, the area that became the symbol of the victory of communism over colonialism in the 1950s, underlines the need to connect the history of the city to the history of the CCP.

The SHM/SRM’s new permanent exhibition fulfills the ambitious task of reconstructing the history of Shanghai from its beginnings, 6000 years ago, until the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Hundreds of objects are arranged on four floors, to chronologically narrate the story of the transformation of Shanghai from a small port town into a metropolis. The exhibition is divided into two main sections, called “Ancient Shanghai” and “Modern Shanghai.” The latter, which occupies the third and fourth floors, opens with a description of the fight for Shanghai during the First Opium War, followed by the establishment of the foreign concessions and the city’s development into a flourishing commercial hub. In contrast to the SDHM, a large section of the new exhibition is dedicated to the history of the Chinese Communist Party and the events of the War of Resistance against Japan. The exhibition closes with iconic images of the
People’s Liberation Army entering the city in 1949, followed by a celebratory video showing all the economic and scientific achievements that have shaped Shanghai’s reputation in the global arena since the 1990s.

The narrative proposed by the Modern Shanghai section of the SHM/SRM must be seen as the most up-to-date, official version of the city’s history. The large space dedicated to the life and deeds of communist heroes and martyrs is a clear departure from the SDHM’s narrative. The museum staff had to consider the current political orientation when designing the exhibition. When asked how the SHM/SRM intended to portray colonialism in Shanghai, the main curator explained:

I wanted to communicate that colonialism was negative for the city, but at the same time I tried to show that the economic development of the city owes a lot to European business. […] (pers. comm. Dec. 7, 2018).

The curator also explained the difficulties he encountered when merging the colonial and the revolutionary narratives of the history of the city:

It was difficult to include “Revolution” in the history of Shanghai. The main problem was that the story/development of the city in this period was not much connected with the revolutionary war (pers. comm. Dec. 7, 2018).

The SHM’s chief curator expressed uncertainty about the idea of merging the history of Shanghai with the national history of revolution promoted by the CCP. The museum’s team tried to strike a balance between the vision of colonial Shanghai as a prosperous and cosmopolitan city where conspicuous consumption and communism are allied, and the growing need to inscribe Shanghai’s development as a nationalist narrative in the history of the Communist revolution.

The museum’s Modern Shanghai section opens with a description of the imperialist expansion in China as aggressive, and semi-colonialism as an oppressive system that limited the freedom of the Chinese people. As visitors proceed through the introduction of new foreign businesses, the establishment of banks such as HSBC, and the development of infrastructures in the city, the dominant narrative of plunder and humiliation slowly transitions into a cosmopolitan interpretation of emerging events. The SHM/SRM’s audio-guide suggests that, although the population suffered under the colonial system, the Shanghai Chinese enthusiastically participated in making the city a famous international metropolis. The exhibition tries to balance the need to criticize the colonial powers and the necessity of celebrating Shanghai’s cosmopolitanism, by showing how the locals successfully adopted the discourse of modernity introduced by the colonizers. Although the exhibition never condones the foreign occupation of the city, it does not criticize the concept of modernity implicit in the discourse of colonial nostalgia, lauding those Chinese who managed to adapt Western models, ideologies, and technologies to local needs. For this reason, the Modern Shanghai section opens with a dramatic portrait of the establishment of the concessions, then highlights how, amid problems, the foreign presence in Shanghai spurred the development of infrastructures, the growth of modern industries, the establishment of banks owned by both foreigners and Chinese entrepreneurs.

The attempt “to show that the economic development of the city owes a lot to European business,” as mentioned by the chief curator (pers. comm. Dec 7, 2018), is in line with the narrative expressed in the 2000s at the SDHM, at Xintiandi and at Sinan Mansions. The
main difference between the SHM/SRM and the other sites is that the role of colonialism in the growth of Shanghai becomes secondary, whereas the CCP’s history takes center stage. Not only do CCP member memorabilia and oil paintings representing the main events of the revolution occupy a larger space in the SHM/SRM in comparison to the area dedicated to life in the city under colonialism, but the narrative proposed by the exhibition also represses the idealized vision promoted by the SDHM.

The SHM/SRM does not downplay only positive feelings about colonial heritage, but also the “darker side” of colonial Shanghai. One of the items that the SDHM returned to the SHM/SRM is the woodcut print of the “Booming Scene at Shanghai Sima Road” (Figure 5). Its reframing in the new exhibition is a case in point of how curators at the SHM/SRM decided to leave out the dark side of colonial history, possibly to avoid tantalizing visitors with Shanghai’s bawdy past. Visitors may see the wooden matrix of the print in the cabinet dedicated to the construction of infrastructures in Shanghai. The audio guide of the museum introduces it as a precious historical artifact that illustrates the variety of vehicles available in Shanghai. The decision to remove the real topic of the “Booming Scene,” namely prostitution, is an attempt to downplay the less savory activities that reigned in parts of the city.

The space the museum allots to describing poverty and criminality in colonial Shanghai is minimal. Opium pipes, pictures of prostitutes, and biographies of famous gangsters are
exhibited in a small cabinet titled “The Long-lasting Mismanagement of the City” (Doushi liubi) in Chinese, in English, translated as “The Dark Side.” The two languages’ different versions of the description of the cabinet reveal some interesting aspects of the museum’s curatorial practices. The development of criminal activities in Shanghai and the lives of famous gangsters such as Du Yuesheng (1888–1951) have not only been the subjects of scholarly work (Wakeman 1996), but also of literature and popular culture. The SHM/SRM’s exhibition does mention Du Yuesheng and other famous gangsters, but it reframes their actions as part of the “Long-lasting mismanagement of the city.” A different reconstruction of the deeds of famous gangsters could have highlighted the porous division between foreigners and Chinese. Moreover, it might have fostered a widespread fascination with the “dark side” of history. The curatorial decision to minimize the representation of Shanghai’s fascinating underworld may be interpreted as an attempt to avoid glamorizing the decadent lifestyle for which the city used to be famous. Any kind of fascination with the “Dark Side” present in the SDHM disappears in the new museum, whose narrative tends to align more with the 1950s’ removal strategies.

The SHM/SRM’s curators also limited references to daily life in Shanghai. Objects of daily use in the early twentieth century – such as ceramics, furniture, and dresses – are displayed in the exhibition, but not only are they few in number, especially in comparison to the CCP members memorabilia, but they are also decontextualized from the environments in which they were used. For instance, there is no mention of religious festivals and ceremonies that punctuated the life of both the Chinese and the foreign communities.

The SHM/SRM’s almost complete disregard for everyday city life suggests an intent to avoid not ideologically overlaid memories. Typical curatorial practices – such as the reconstruction of living interiors, the presentation of everyday objects in their original environments, or the reconstruction of old shops – are almost completely absent from the museum, which privileges the description of select historical events and the glorification of revolutionary heroes over the depiction of common people’s lives.

Although some of the themes presented in the SHM/SHM are similar to those still on view at the SDHM, the new exhibition removes both nostalgic and gloomier representations of colonial Shanghai, instead resurrecting the city’s Communist spirit. A glorification of Shanghai’s metropolitan modernity is still present, but it is eclipsed by the history of the revolution. At the end of the exhibition, a video celebrates the CCP, and especially Party leader Xi Jinping, as the establishers of Shanghai’s urban modernity, economic prosperity, and scientific development. The CCP’s is presented as the heir of the gospel of modernity that resulted from colonial presence.

The SHM/SRM removes the memories of the Maoist years, since they are “too problematic” to be presented to the public (pers. comm. Dec. 7, 2018). By removing the dramatic events which followed the establishment of the PRC, instead highlighting the CCP’s success in bringing prosperity to Shanghai, the SHM/SRM manages to keep intact an idealized vision of the CCP’s history, striking a balance between conspicuous communism and the nationalist version of communism promoted by Xi Jinping, while removing or downplaying the memory of Maoism.
Concluding Remarks: Re-emergence of Colonialism Despite Everything

Despite earlier efforts to remove traces of colonialism, colonial heritage is very present in Shanghai. Even a strong ideology of removal tends to conjure up the colonial past. Beneath the dark sides of European colonialism presented by the SHDM’s narrative, a fascination with the undisciplined life of the “underworld,” the sexual fantasies, and the befuddled dreams of opium smokers sometimes broke through the dominant narrative. Such cracks were signs of repression.

When colonial heritage was nostalgically reframed to serve the new political strategies of what this article terms “conspicuous communism,” carried along by a designed ideology of refashioning the cityscape to become the symbol of a cosmopolitan, future-oriented space, other signs also popped up. The conspicuous nature of consumption involves an undisciplined element, the undisciplined consumer of the wasteful and unproductive (Lagerkvist 2010, 222). Even in their fashionable designs, consumer goods may carry messages that contest the dominant framing. The legendary Shanghai girl of colonially induced modernity still offers an image of freedom and emancipation for female, middle-class consumers.

The protests against the gentrification of the concession areas through simulacra of colonial heritage also indicate the presence of voices that are not aligned with the reframing strategy. Local inhabitants who are either forced to move or continue their daily life surrounded by the designed nostalgia of the colonial past, indirectly challenge the dominant narrative of conspicuous communism, and this in two ways. First, as visible evidence of the ordinary or even poor people who used to inhabit these areas in colonial times, and secondly, as people who have no access to the middle class’s conspicuous consumption. The presence of people with few resources disturbs the communist dimension of the narrative. They constantly underscore the paradox of a communism based on consumption and not on production. Furthermore, as representatives of the local population, they also challenge the nostalgia of a cosmopolitan Shanghai.

It is possible to speak of re-emergence when colonial heritage is actively decolonized to indicate alternative ways of thinking about intercultural relations that will enable new common approaches to the past. The designed nostalgia of the strategy of reframing becomes a steppingstone for positioning Shanghai as a hypermodern place, globally ahead of others in the race for world leadership. Amanda Lagerkvist has made futurity the crucial marker of local strategies, and nostalgia for futures past the main ammunition for these strategies (Lagerkvist 2010). However, this obsession with futurity cannot be viewed as an indicator of re-emergence. The focus on world leadership is instead part of an effort to take over the role of modernity’s beacon from the Western world, or what Walter Mignolo has called a strategy of “de-westernization” (Mignolo 2011). Modernity the Shanghai, or the Chinese way, is still a form of modernity. Even if the Shanghai version of de-westernization has been increasingly controlled by the central government in Beijing, resulting in a return to a more classic approach to communism, and thus a removal-oriented approach to colonial heritage, it may hardly be viewed as an alternative to existing understandings of colonial heritage. In both versions, colonialism acted as a catapult that once determined the path of a modernity that is presently solidly in the hands of the Chinese. Thus, colonial heritage is either the centerpiece of modernity, or a conspicuous part of it.
If colonial heritage is used to contest dominant narratives and add new understandings of colonialism, then a practice related to re-emergence may be detected. The undisciplined consumers, the Shanghai girl, and the residents are all voices that challenge the dominant narrative and reinterpret colonial heritage in ways that may be considered alternative. Even in the highly scripted settings of museums signs of alternative understandings can be found.

The two bronze lions, called Steven and Stitt, are an illustrative example which welcome visitors in the entrance hall of the SHM. The two custom-made sculptures from Great Britain were once situated at the entrance of the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation headquarters, an edifice described by local newspapers as “the most beautiful building from the Far East to the Bering Strait” (Liu 2016, 55–57). They acquired their names from the first names of the two general managers of the bank, and were liked by the locals, who loved to touch their paws in the belief that this gesture would bring them wealth (Liu 2016, 57). They survived the War of Resistance and the revolution of 1949, and during the Cultural Revolution the lions were stored in a warehouse of the Shanghai Museum to save them from the iconoclastic attacks of the Red Guards (Ho 2018, 229). They later became part of the SHM’s collection.

Stitt and Steve are incredibly popular with visitors, who often refer to them as their favorite objects in the museum. Placed at the entrance, they are the first objects that the visitors encounter. At the most basic level, they are simply Steve and Stitt greeting you, but they also represent Shanghai’s colonial heritage. Their obvious symbolism is the raw force of Western capitalism (their roaring). However, something else is at work here. There is a third meaning – an obtuse meaning – to borrow a term from Roland Barthes (Barthes 1977). The function of this third meaning is to be “obtuse,” or rather to disturb the obvious meaning and introduce a disruptive force. It has no clear referent. It is difficult to explain why the lions are there. They establish a distance to the dominant practices and narratives of removal and reframing. Following Barthes, this distance leads to the “erethism” or “emergence” of something else (Barthes 1977, 2). The colonial heritage re-emerges in a new, critical form. The wandering lions become supplementary signifiers that points to the colonial past as something that appears and disappears, but always challenges the dominant narratives whether they are patriotically communist or pseudo-nostalgic clichês of modernity. Because they are somewhat out of context – the pleasant and personalized lions that present excellent photo opportunities even before the visit has begun – they impose question marks on the exhibition that lies behind them. The re-emergent lions do not explicitly outline any alternative visions of the relations between former colonizers and the formerly colonized, but their mere presence signals that the colonial entanglement is not simply over. It must be rethought. It is this re-thinking that holds promises of new ways of approaching former, difficult relations.

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