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To sum up, Halperin presents to his readers a significant amount of information on Sung literati’s views on Buddhism as expressed in temple commemorations. His analysis and interpretation are sound, and his arguments well grounded. Despite the errors in translation and in references, the reader will find the book challenging and inspiring. The publisher, however, would do the readers of the book a great service if it attended to the aforementioned editing flaws.

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There seems to be no end in sight to the ongoing stream of writings on how the image of Republican Shanghai as the hybridized city of speed, modernity, and sensuous abandon was produced and recycled. This is not to be lamented and Alexander Des Forges’s highly readable book, Mediasphere Shanghai, is a welcome addition to this field in which the author presents a new perspective on this interesting topic. Whereas other scholars of Shanghai literature and culture tend to read the literature from the city based on the assumption that it reflects its historical and socioeconomic status, Des Forges argues for the primacy of the text in shaping people’s relations with the place. Des Forges’s argument is that literature about Shanghai, originating with the instalment fiction from the late Qing period, constituted and framed people’s expectations and experiences of the city. Fiction set in Shanghai created a narrative of Western development and influence and established a fixed set of conceptions about the city which in turn led people to seek out pleasures and experiences that conformed with their expectations. This included taking carriage rides, strolling leisurely in Yuyuan 豫園, and visiting the tea houses or brothels. Writings about Shanghai and the representation of the city thus ultimately played a key role in cultivating and giving shape to long-time residents’ identity as Szahaenin, i.e. Shanghai people.

Des Forges bases this argument on a wide range of sources from fiction to guide books, photographs, and film. These different media constitute the “mediasphere” of the
title, a term borrowed from Régis Debray, which Des Forges uses to characterize the media industry centred around Shanghai. The bulk of his analysis is based on the popular instalment fiction serialized in newspapers from the 1890s to the 1920s. These works, such as the well-known *Lives of Shanghai Flowers* 海上花列傳 (1892–1894) by Han Bangqing 韓邦慶 and *The Huangpu Tides* 歇浦潮 (1916–1921) by Zhu Shouju 朱瘦菊, are the main focus of the first five chapters in the book. The two last chapters are principally concerned with showing how later writings were indebted to such instalment fiction in their representation of the city. These echoes of earlier modes of writing are found in Mao Dun’s 茅盾 *Midnight* 子夜 (1931) and Hou Hsiao-hsien’s 侯孝賢 film *Flowers of Shanghai* 海上花 (1998) as well as in a few short stories by the modernist writers of the 1930s. Lumping this diverse bundle of literature and art together, Des Forges proposes the material be seen as part of a genre or historical family which he calls “Shanghai fiction.” Through these works he traces linkages across the supposedly traditional late Qing instalment fiction, the fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, and the nostalgic revival of Shanghai found in contemporary art. He posits that such literature displays four main “aesthetic forms” or tropes, namely *simultaneity, interruption, mediation,* and *excess.* These forms structure the way in which readers of fiction came to perceive Shanghai and it is the study of these forms that more or less guides the readings and analysis of texts throughout *Mediasphere Shanghai.*

The serialized novels which became so popular in the Shanghai newspapers of the late nineteenth century are characterized by their length and narrative complexity. Without main protagonists or over-arching plots, the narrative focus shifts between a multitude of individual storylines that are interwoven as characters meet and travel about the city. Characters appear briefly, thus setting them up for reappearance many chapters later, or they are never heard from again. Storylines are cut off abruptly between instalments or even in the middle of them. Des Forges likens the narrative effect to the cross-cutting technique of cinema. To this reader, the narrative approach seems to have much in common with contemporary British TV soap operas such as *Coronation Street* or *EastEnders* which have run for decades. These long-lived series similarly feature a multitude of simultaneous plotlines which cross back and forth and develop on or off stage with the camera shifting between characters as they meet at random outside their homes, at the market, or in the local pub—the modern parallel of the courtesan houses serving as hubs in which characters argue, relax, flirt, and make new acquaintances. In any case, Des Forges’s aesthetic forms *simultaneity* and *interruption* are suitable labels as the fundamental structure by which both late Qing instalment fiction and modern British TV shows create a rambling multi-layered episodic framework that can carry on for years while spellbinding sizeable audiences.

The notion of *excess* also seems to be a natural fit in attempting to characterize literature about Shanghai. The well-known epithet as the “Paris of the Orient” conjures up associations with dance halls, taxi girls, neon lights, and vulgar displays of consumption and wealth. In late Qing serialized novels, the trope of excess seems to manifest itself mainly in overindulgence and dissipation fuelled by the consumption of opium. An excess of leisure brings ruination, harms the body, and can lead to public humiliation. Des Forges
useful to signify what the May Fourth intellectuals were opposed to rather than anything which the authors thus designated had in common. Des Forges is far more wary of the term “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” which is sensibly cordoned off within citation marks. A more explicit discussion of such terms would have been useful. Des Forges’s arguments are indeed convincing, but I wish the differences in the material had been delineated more clearly. In this vein, the study might have benefited from paying greater attention to the competing discursive agendas that attempted to appropriate and represent various elements of modernity, such as the contested “modern woman.” Similarly in the study of the formation of Szahaenin identity, Des Forges borders on glossing over the continued importance of regional identities among immigrant groups.

Des Forges’s focus on the formative influence of literature is useful, particularly the overview of late Qing instalment fiction and the argument that it influenced later perceptions of Shanghai. As such, it complements historical studies, such as Wen-hsin Yeh’s recent *Shanghai Splendor* on the formation of capitalist middle class sensibilities. I also agree with Des Forges that we should treat the writings of Shanghai authors such as Shi Zhecun and Mu Shiying more often in the context of Chinese literature as opposed to seeing them as simple reflections of foreign influence or Shanghai’s political and social status. The strength of Des Forges’s book is not so much in bringing new literature to light, but rather in questioning the approach of others who have looked at the same material. His analysis is a welcome addition to the field with its discussion on how Shanghai was represented in literature with linkages drawn to the formation of regional identity, leisure pursuits, and modern nostalgia.

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