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THE PARAMOUNT BALLROOM IN THE 1930s: A MODERNIST SOCIAL AND
ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

By

Xi Zhang

B.A., Sichuan International Studies University, 2009

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Fine Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May, 2012

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A Thesis Approved on

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ABSTRACT

THE PARAMOUNT BALLROOM IN THE 1930s: A MODERNIST SOCIAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

Xi Zhang

April 9 2012

The Paramount Ballroom was an innovative urban space that challenged traditional Chinese values. In doing so it played an important role in Shanghai's modernization. Traditional Confucian morality set very strict regulations on the social interaction of men and women, while, in contrast, the architectural space of the Paramount Ballroom allowed men and women to have close contact. The experience created by this architecture was not just pleasurable and fashionable; it was a sign of modernity. This study reconstructs the entertainment experience of the contemporary middle class in the newly constructed ballrooms of Shanghai. It examines how the Paramount Ballroom emerged, how it was interpreted by Chinese society, and the historical role it played in modernizing Shanghai's urban space in the 1930s.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
 INTRODUCTION	 1
CHAPTER I: THE PARAMOUNT AND DANCING CULTURE IN SHANGHAI	3
The Paramount	7
A novel scene in Shanghai: Western dancing moving eastward.....	10
An era of the Paramount Ballroom: Shanghai after 1932.....	16
CHAPTER II: THE INVESTOR LIANCHENG GU AND THE SITE	
SELECTION	19
Site Selection	23
CHAPTER III: LIGHT, HEAT, AND POWER: THE ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN OF	
THE PARAMOUNT	25
Different spatial experience	25
Plan of the Paramount	28
Outside the Paramount	32
Fluid urban public space: modern, open and popular	43
Two varied experiences of the dance floor	48

CHAPTER IV: EXPERIENCING AND EXPRESSING: THE IMAGIERY OF MODERNIATION	53
Women's new images and the modern imagination	58
Women's experience: Shaping Their Own Discourse of Power	63
Men's experience: from architectural space to social space	69
CONCLUSION: THE GATE TO ONE HUNDRED PLEASURES	72
REFERENCES	75
CURRICULUM VITAE	80

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	PAGE
1. <i>Shen Bao</i> reported the Paramount “Open to the Public on December 15” on March 21, 1933	5
2. <i>The North China Daily News</i> reported the Paramount “Open to the Public on December 15” on March 21, 1933	5
3. <i>Le Journal de Shanghai</i> reported the Paramount “Open to the Public on December 15” on March 21, 1933	6
4. The band of the Paramount, <i>Le Journal de Shanghai</i> , December 24, 1933	6
5.1. The designer of the Paramount, Yang Xiliu in the 1970s	9
5.2. Xiliu Yang’s old residence in Tongli, Wujiang	9
6. Dancing Parties	15
7. Popularity of dancing class in 1930s’ Shanghai	15
8. Map of 1930s’ Shanghai	18
9. Gu Jingzhai	22
10. Gu Liancheng	22
11. The plan of the first-floor of the Paramount	31
12. The present Cathay Cinema	38
13.1. Today’s Paramount	38
13.2. The column-shaped lighthouse of the Paramount	39
13.3. The column-shaped lighthouse and the signage format of the Paramount	39

14.1. The opening of the Metropol Theater, December 5, 1933	40
14.2. Series reports of Hollywood Stars, December 2, 1933	40
15.1. The entrance of the Paramount, December 15, 1933	41
15.2. The lobby of the Paramount	41
16.1. The circular space on the second floor entrance into the lounge	42
16.2. The present lounge of the second-floor circular dance floor	42
17.1. The plan of the second-floor of the Paramount with the main sprung dance floor	46
17.2. The plan of the third-floor of the Paramount with the smaller glass dance floor	46
18.1. The interior decoration of the Paramount	47
18.2. The interior decoration of the Paramount, under the smaller glass dance floor	47
18.3. The present interior decoration of the Paramount	47
19. The main dance floor of the Paramount	51
20.1. The cross-section and plan of the steel sprung floor	51
20.2. The wooden “sprung” floor utilized by Yang in the design of the Paramount	52
21. The smaller glass dance floor of the Paramount	52
22. Charlie Chaplin and Paulette Goddard dancing at the Paramount	57
23. Taxi dance girls in Shanghai in the 1930s	61
24. Calendar of dancing scenes	61
25. Pin-up girl in 1930s Shanghai prints	62

26. Hongxiang Company hosting a fashion show in the Paramount in the 1930s ...	62
27. Popular taxi dancer Qiu Suying of the Paramount	68
28. Popular taxi dancer, Chen Manli of the Paramount	68
29. The monthly income and expenses of an average dance hostess	68
30.1. Dance Ticket of the Paramount	71
30.2. Dance Ticket of the Metropolitan	71
30.3. Coupon from Majestic Ballroom	71

INTRODUCTION

As a new kind of architecture for entertainment, the ballroom¹ did not appear in Shanghai until the late nineteenth century. In the history of Shanghai's modernization, the ballroom played significant role as an urban public entertainment space throughout the Republican era.² During this period, which was influenced by traditional Confucian values, gender roles in public spaces were rigidly prescribed. The ballroom, however, created a public space that allowed women and men to have close and constant physical contact. The phenomenon of this innovative spatial experience prompts the following questions. How did the dancing space emerge in modern China? How did this new type of building become incorporated into and be interpreted by Chinese society? Furthermore, what role did the ballroom play in the transformation of Shanghai in the 1930s as well as in the expansion of its urban space?

This thesis answers these questions through a case study of the Paramount Ballroom within the background of the larger historical and cultural context of Shanghai in the

¹ There have been many different translations for Chinese *Wuting*, such as ballroom, cabaret and dance hall. The foreigners and the wealthy Chinese patronized the leading high-class ballrooms and cabarets, which offered floorshows and performances, such as the Paramount. Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern, The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999, 23.

² The historical context of the ballroom I research focuses on the Republican era (1911-1949), and here I narrow down the Paramount in the period of 1930s, before the explosion of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

1930s. By reconstructing the architectural design, spatial structure, and the type of performance exhibited at the Paramount Ballroom, the paper explores how the entertainment experience of the contemporary middle class came into being in the newly constructed ballrooms, and how this experience cultivated an image of modern life for the middle-class communities of contemporary Shanghai.

CHAPTER I

THE PARAMOUNT AND DANCING CULTURE IN SHANGHAI

“What a cheap creep! Nuits de Paris, Nuits de Paris indeed! It may not sound polite, but even the john at the Paramount must have taken up more room than the Nuits de Paris dance floor!”³ Such was the lament of an aging dance hostess over the Evening Paris Ballroom of Taibei in the 1940’s novel, *The Last Night of Taipan Chin*. These words expressed her sentimental attachment to the past glory of the Paramount Ballroom – “the premier ballroom in the Far East.”⁴ With the growing popularity of Western dance and the profusion of ballrooms in Shanghai, the Paramount Ballroom became a representative of the new culture in terms of its style, structure, material, and interior spatial experience.

The Paramount was built between 1932 and 1933. Never before had a name such as “Paramount” appeared so frequently in novels, posters, and movies that the name itself came to represent the entire Shanghai entertainment industry. Nearly a thousand elite Chinese and foreign nationals in Shanghai were invited to its opening on Friday night, December 15, 1933. Every newspaper in Shanghai, in both Chinese and foreign languages, such as *Shen Bao* (Shanghai Daily) (Fig. 1), *The North China Daily News* (Fig. 2), *Shanghai Evening Post*, and *Le Journal de Shanghai* (Fig. 3), carried serial reports of

³ Pai Hsien-yung, “Jindaban de zuihou yiye” (The last night of Taipan Chin), *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream: Tales of Taipei Characters*, trans. Pai Hsien-yung and Patia Yasin, ed. George Kao, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, 51.

⁴ According to the advertisements of that time (i.e., *Shen Bao*, March 21, 1933), print media favored terms such as “the premier ballroom in the Far East,” “the largest ballroom in the Far East,” or “the best ballroom in the Far East” to label the Paramount, so this probably was the origin where the name derived from.

the activities at the Paramount for many days. These included descriptions of the facilities, on-going events, the operating hours of the Paramount, and its advertisements. The building far transcended its merely formal and functional characteristics, becoming an emblem of 1930s urban Shanghai. (Fig.4)

Figure 1. *Shen Bao* reported the Paramount “Open to the Public on December 15” on March 21, 1933 (photo taken by the author in June of 2010)

Figure 2. *The North China Daily News* reported the Paramount “Open to the Public on December 15” on March 21, 1933 (photo taken by the author in June of 2011)

Figure 3. *Le Journal de Shanghai* reported the Paramount “Open to the Public on December 15” on March 21, 1933 (photo taken by the author in June of 2011)

Figure 4. The band of the Paramount, *Le Journal de Shanghai*, December 24, 1933 (photo taken by the author in August of 2011)

The Paramount

The very foreign quality of the name “Paramount” exemplified the first translation of an architectural language from a foreign context to its Chinese counterpart in the collaboration between the architect Xiliu Yang and the investor Liancheng Gu. The Chinese translation of “Paramount,” *bailemen*, literally means “gate to a hundred of pleasures.” It is also the name of the well-known Hollywood studio, and by importing such an exotic name, the architect and the businessman intended to imbue this modern architectural landmark with the charm of traditional Chinese culture.⁵

Unlike many contemporary architects who had studied abroad, Yang, who was graduated from Nanyang University (today Shanghai Jiaotong University) in 1922, had no direct exposure to American life or culture.⁶ (Figs. 5.1, 5.2) The English name “Paramount,” and the building’s Art Deco design, may well have been inspired by his elder brother Zuotao, one of the pioneers of Chinese animation, who had studied in the United States and had worked for the Walt Disney Company. As the two brothers shared a close relationship, Zuotao’s Western artistic concepts probably had an immense influence on his career as an architect.⁷ The ingenious choice of a name, with its multiple layers of meaning, conveyed the idea of Shanghai as the “Paris of the East,” a modern pleasure land, which featured the elegant world of modern dance. The format and font of “Paramount” on the signage also utilized the modern style. Characterized by simple lines of Art Deco, it embodied the new spirit of European and American capitalism and wealth

⁵ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern, The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, 23.

⁶ Delin Lai, *Jindai Zhejiang lu* (Architects of Modern China), Beijing, China Waterpower Press, 2006, 194-195

⁷ According to the author’s interview with the architect Xiliu Yang’s son, Weixun Yang (2010, Beijing) and local scholars from the architect’s hometown (2009, Tongli town, Wujiang city), the Yang brothers shared strong emotional bond since childhood. Zuotao Yang was recruited by the Anglo-American Tobacco Company as an art designer and sent to study in the United States. He later became the principal animation artist of the special effect department of the Disney Workshop and participated in the production of several animated films such as *Snow White* and *Dumbo*. Source is local scholar, Shen Changhua’s (unpublished) article, *Tongli jiaoyang* (The Yang Family in Tongli).

with the flourish of Art Deco in architectural and interior design in the early twentieth century.⁸

⁸ The term "Art Deco" has its origins from a Paris art exhibition held in 1925, Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts). This style quickly gained popularity in the United States, where it reached the height of its achievement in architecture. Art Deco embodied what Patricia Bayer describes as an "architecture of ornament, geometry, energy, retrospection, optimism, color, texture, light and at times even symbolism," especially in New York City's soaring skyscrapers of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern, The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, 11; Patricia Bayer, *Art Deco Architecture: Design, Decoration, and Detail from the Twenties and Thirties*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992, 8; Patricia Bayer, *Art Deco Interiors: Decoration and Design Classics of the 1920s and 1930s*, Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1990, 7-9.

Figure 5.1. The designer of the Paramount, Yang Xiliu in the 1970s (photo provided by Yang Xiliu's son when the author visited him in May of 2010)

Figure 5.2. Xiliu Yang's old residence in Tongli, Wujiang County, Suzhou City (photo taken by the author in June of 2010)

A Novel Scene in Shanghai: Western Dancing Moving Eastward

It was only after the arrival of foreigners in China that men and women physically embraced each other while dancing. Although dance had long been a part of Chinese tradition, it was under the influence of Westerners that it became a popular form of urban entertainment. Historically, dance was a significant part of various folk festivals, mythology, and entertainment for their masters, whether divine or general population.⁹ Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the new form of amusement and social communication that was Western social dance had become an important symbol of China's transition from a traditional to a modern society, and showed the impetus toward change among the Chinese people. The Paramount Ballroom was one of the dance establishments opened to the public within an increasingly widespread cultural context in Shanghai. These ballrooms began to emerge as a new, one of a kind public entertainment space and a morally ambiguous zone.

With the advent of Western social dancing, Chinese men and women experienced a change in their attitudes toward this close physical contact. Many went from curiosity, puzzlement, objection and rejection to recognition, appreciation and acceptance. In the initial stages of China's opening up to the outside world during the late Qing Dynasty, some Chinese went abroad and observed various novelties of Western culture, which they duly recorded and inevitably considered. Western dance parties were both shocking and fascinating to Chinese. Their most captivating experiences abroad were contrary to elite Chinese aphorisms and customs, for instance *qi sui bu tong xi*, which literally means boys

⁹ China has a long history of dancing as culture. There are considerable records of people dancing during religious rituals for entertaining deities, or for folk festivals, such as the Temple Fair. "The Chinese character, *wu* (witchcraft, or sorcery), derived originally from *wu* (dancing), for praying to gods." Xu Shenzhuan, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* (Comments on Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters), Han Dynasty, Duan yucai comments., Qing Dynasty, Shanghai, Shanghai Guji Press, 1981, 201.

and girls could not be seated together after their seventh birthday. One such record was by Wang Tao, a Chinese scholar who traveled to Europe in 1868 and subsequently spent two years in Britain. After his return to China, Wang wrote *A Record of Travels*, which included a chapter, “Dancing Parties,” that recorded his observations of the dances he witnessed in Scotland. (Fig. 6) In 1877, the Deputy Minister to Britain, Liu Xihong, was invited to a royal dancing party at Buckingham Palace. He later wrote in his *A Personal Record of Travels in Britain*, that “the ladies exposed their shoulders and the men exposed¹⁰ their lower bodies. They embraced and held each other in the dance.”¹¹

These customs were in direct conflict with Chinese mores. Traditionally, the Chinese people believed that it was improper for men and women even to touch each other’s hands. However, some more open-minded people explained this practice as a way of forming matrimonial relations. One person to hold such beliefs was Li Shuchang, who visited many European countries as a diplomatic counselor about the same time Liu Xihong visited Britain. In his *Miscellaneous Record of Travels in Europe* he explained the “courtship” function of touching during a dance. This view of “dancing to establish matrimony” was widely accepted in the late Qing Dynasty. In fact, the late nineteenth-century publication, *Dian shi zhai hua bao* (Tian shi zhai Pictorial, issue 198), contained a picture entitled “Dancing to Establish Matrimony.”¹² The original source is uncertain, but it may have been printed in a Western publication or from an illustration of an actual event involving Western residents of Shanghai.

¹⁰ The men would not have “exposed” their lower body in the same way as women expose their shoulders. I suppose the men wore tight-fitting pants or formal kilts.

¹¹ Zhong Shuhe ed., *zou xiang shi jie* (To the World), Vol. II, Hunan, Yuelü Publishing House, 1985, 153; Liu Xihong, *A Personal Record of Travels in Britain*, Hunan, Yuelü Publishing House, 1980.

¹² “Dancing to Establish Matrimony,” Shanghai, *Dian shi zhai hua bao* (Tian shi zhai Pictorial) 1889, supplementary issue, 198.

With the arrival of social dancing came the introduction of the dance party. In the early stages of social dancing's popularity there were no independent ballrooms. The parties were usually held in specific places such as foreign consulates and Western hotels. Eventually the ballroom, a new architectural form, slowly began to appear in Shanghai, creating a completely new urban public space. Foreign diplomatic establishments and the private residences of the noble and the wealthy had often served as the venues for such activities, but these spaces were inaccessible to ordinary people.

The British consulate was completed in 1846 and in 1850 Shanghai saw its first dancing party, held in the British concession.¹³ As no foreign ladies attended, the men were without female companions; the party was later called "a dancing party for bachelors."¹⁴ Subsequently, several types of buildings with dance halls were constructed in Shanghai. In 1864, the British constructed an elegant three-story wooden structure, called the Shanghai Club, along the Bund as a site for foreigners to hold dancing parties.¹⁵ New Western-style hotels began to appear in Shanghai and the ballrooms in these hotels quickly became fashionable venues for social entertainment. The most luxurious hotels, including the Astor House (built by British merchants in 1846), and the Palace Hotel (built in 1866), all operated ballrooms and bars.¹⁶

At this time, while ballroom dancing was a popular form of entertainment and social interaction among Westerners, they were not as yet open to the Chinese public. As a note with a poem published in Shanghai's *Shen Bao* newspaper (1872) explained with obvious

¹³ *Shanghai wudao zhi. Shanghai geju zhi* (Shanghai Dancing Records. Shanghai Opera Records), see Zhang Wei, *Hu du jiuying* (Old Photos and Stories of Shanghai), Shanghai, Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2002, 45.

¹⁴ Wu Guilong, "lun wan qing Shanghai waiqiao renkou de bianqian" (A Discussion on Changes of Foreign Population in Late Qing Shanghai), *Historical Review*, Issue IV, 1998.

¹⁵ After this, foreign consulates opened their clubs, where they established an ideal dancing place. (See Park Ja-young, "The Construction and Imagination of Space, on Women's Daily Life of Shanghai in 1920s and 1930s," doctoral dissertation, 2002, East China Normal University).

¹⁶ Zhang Wei, *Hu du jiuying* (Old Photos and Stories of Shanghai), 45-46.

disapprovals, “they get drunk in the inn, and the men and women hold each other for a dance to entertain themselves.”¹⁷ This view of the Western dance scene, which remained restricted to foreigners, was still held by many Chinese. *A Traveler’s Miscellaneous Record of Shanghai*, written by Ge Yuanxu in 1876, made no mention of “dance” or “ballroom,” even though this book was considered “a travel guide of modern Shanghai.” It recorded in detail the teahouses, restaurants, theaters and story-telling halls, paying particular attention paid to the brothels.

Change came in the late nineteenth century when more and more elite Chinese citizens attended the increasingly popular dancing parties. Both promotion in government service, especially for those contact with foreigners and personal curiosity drove them to these Western parties. Also, it was an honor to be invited to attend such parties which were usually held by the Chinese government. The most well-known of these was a banquet hosted by Cai Jun, the governor of Shanghai, in 1897 to celebrate the “Birthday of Empress Dowager Cixi.” Though the Qing government tried to highlight the political aspects of the occasion, which *Shen Bao* described as a “universal celebration,” Western newspapers in Shanghai focused the amusement rather than the diplomacy. The English-language newspaper, *North China Daily News* reported on “The Dance Party Hosted by the Governor of Shanghai.”¹⁸ The article particularly emphasized the historical importance of the event, stating that “a dancing party hosted by a Chinese high official is absolutely no small case of entertainment.”¹⁹ This particular dancing party was held in the foreign affairs office on Jing’ansi Road. According to these reports, there were

¹⁷ *Hu bei xi ren zhuzhici* (Folk Poems about Foreigners in Northern Shanghai), Shanghai, *Shen Bao*, May 29, 1872.

¹⁸ *Shiwu Bao*, Nov. 24, 1897, Vol. 26, Zeng Guangquan trans., “Shanghai daotai tiaowu ji” (Record of Shanghai Governor in Dancing Party).

¹⁹ *Chengshi Bao*, Nov. 24, 1897, Vol. 12, “zhong wai jin shi” (Chinese and Foreigners: The Dance Party Hosted by the Governor of Shanghai).

“numerous hanging lamps [which] create an atmosphere of a wonderland, while the main hall is surrounded by long corridors and chairs and the chandeliers are dazzling.”²⁰ The second floor, where the female guests could rest, “has one room that overlooks the downstairs hall clearly.” This room was “shielded by a screen at the windows,” clearly influenced by the practice of traditional Chinese theaters where the “segregation of men and women” was still required while watching a performance.

In the early twentieth century, when the general attitude of the Chinese toward social dancing became more approving, fashion-conscious students became the first group in Shanghai to participate in this form of entertainment. Dancing classes and training programs spread from courses in the schools to independent institutes. (Fig.7) The exaggerated reports as well as scenes in all kinds of media from newspapers and films further promoted the popularity of ballroom dancing. The Black Cat Ballroom, which opened to the public by the Ningbo Compatriots Association on Xizang Road in 1928, was the first independently operated ballroom and the first to provide taxi dancers.²¹ This intimate dancing was no longer reserved for foreigners. It was adopted first by the Chinese elite, rather than to the general public, and completely lost its original stigma. It became a symbol of Shanghainese identity and of the assimilation of Western culture. The number of ballrooms multiplied in Shanghai, creating the new public spaces of the metropolitan Shanghai.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Zhang Wei, *Hu du jiuying* (Old Photos and Stories of Shanghai). A taxi dancers was a paid dance partner in the ballroom. The term “taxi dancer” probably derived originally from the fact that, in comparison with a taxicab driver’s wage, the dancer’s pay is proportional to the time dancing with the customer.

Figure 6. Dancing Parties (from *A Record of Travels* by Wang Tao)

Figure 7. Popularity of dancing class in 1930s' Shanghai (from *The North China Daily News*, Saturday, July 1, 1933; photo taken by the author in 2010)

An Era of the Paramount Ballroom: Shanghai after 1932

Since the opening of Shanghai to foreign trade in 1843, the British Settlement (1845) and the French Concession (1849) had been limited by their boundaries along the Yangzi River. Shanghai, China's first modern metropolis was remapped by three separate administrations: those of the International Settlement (formed in 1863 by the consolidation with British and American settlements), the French Concession, and the old walled city.²² (Fig.8) The unique political form of the concession and the republican government controlled the decision-making power of Shanghai in its commercial, cultural, and political activities. By the late nineteenth century, Shanghai boasted a booming economy and numerous large-scale urban construction projects, fueled by emerging infusions of foreign and native capitalism as well as the surging populations of both Chinese and foreigners. Shanghai became known as the "Paris of the Orient." As T. J. Clark's defined of the modernity of contemporary Paris, "modernity is a matter of representations and major myths — of a new Paris for recreation, leisure and pleasure ... of the prostitute taking over and of fluidity of class in the popular spaces of entertainment."²³

In this new "Paris," the flourishing ballrooms celebrated the "leisure, consumption, the spectacle, and money" that accompanied Shanghai's economic prosperity. The new sexuality that became associated with Shanghai's consumer culture found its place in the ballroom. Ballroom consumption had become commercial, with modern urban characteristics, including department stores and cinemas. As an open modern public

²² Reference from Samuel Y. Liang, *Mapping Modernity in Shanghai: Space, Gender, and Visual Culture in the Sojourners' City*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, 11-12; Deke Erh and Tess Johnston, *Shanghai Art Deco*, Hong Kong, Old China Hand Press, 2006, 12-15.

²³ Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, London and New York, Routledge, 1988, 52.

space, the ballroom provided an acceptable alternative to a traditional brothel that carried the stigma of indecency and immorality in middle class communities. Instead, what was sold in the ballroom space was the expectation of sexual desire as well as modern experience.

Figure 8. Map of 1930s' Shanghai (from Deke Erh, *Frenchtown Shanghai*; marked by the author)

CHAPTER II

THE INVESTOR LIANCHENG GU AND THE SITE SELECTION

The Paramount Ballroom was the creation of two modern Chinese, the architect Xiliu Yang, and the investor, Liancheng Gu²⁴, a successful silk manufacturer-dealer from Suzhou.²⁵ Gu's family had been engaged in national industries since the mid-nineteenth century, and later became one of the wealthiest and most recognized "Four Families" in the Nanxun region²⁶. The development of Gu's family epitomized Chinese capitalism. In the late nineteenth century, both Chinese and foreigners poured into Shanghai, pinning their hopes on the city's explosive growth. These national capitalists from the southern Yangzi River area gradually started to explore business with the outside world. At the same time they also dominated such key industries as salt and silk, and the country's property market.²⁷

Gu's grandfather and his father, Jingzhai and Fuchang, were wealthy and powerful businessmen in the silk industry, banks, and shipping in major cities south of the Yangzi River, Suzhou, Wuxi, and Shanghai. Jingzhai was one of the earliest Chinese industrialists doing business with foreigners in Shanghai.²⁸ While most traditional

²⁴ According to the interview of Yang's son, Gu was definitely the major patron. There were probably also a few other bankers who contributed to the building. See Andrew D. Field, *Shanghai's Dancing World: Cabaret Culture and Urban Politics, 1919-1954*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2010, 97.

²⁵ Suzhou, one of the four well-known cities of silk production, lies about 100 km from Shanghai.

²⁶ Suzhou is also was included in this district.

²⁷ Especially when the national government in Nanjing issued the currency reform in 1935, trying to monopolize national money and finance, I believe that national capitalists and industrialists met their golden age before the state-controlled reform began.

²⁸ Zhou Qingyun, *Nanxun Zhi* (Records of Nanxun District), Shanghai, Shanghai Shudian, 1992, 219; Dong Huimin, Shi Yumin, and Li Zhangcheng, *Zhengjiang sichou minshang juzi, nanxun sixiang* (The Silk Businessmen in Zhenjiang

Chinese were used to being humble in front of the camera, the photos of Gu's grandfather and father appear different from the usual portrait style. (Fig.9) Gu's photograph was intended to convey the new spirit of a national industrialist, confident and optimistic toward the future of Chinese industry. In 1922 the Gu family's silk company, Yuankangsi, sent its products as far as the Philadelphia World Fair, where they were recognized as one of the award-winning products.²⁹ More ambitious than his ancestors, Gu Liancheng entered the broader world of business, with interests in the real estate and entertainment industries. (Fig.10)

As one of the rising modern Chinese entrepreneurs, Gu Liancheng spent almost 700,000 taels on the land to be used for building the Paramount. This new generation of bankers and businessmen had accumulated their capital through the newly prosperous real estate market and the national industries in Shanghai. The dancing establishment became an ideal place to display and enjoy the wealth they had recently acquired.

It was a wise move to invest in the ballroom industry at a time when social dancing, beginning in the early twentieth century, was rising in popularity. As more and more Chinese people crowded into the ballroom and the dancing culture emerged, these national industrialists shifted their interest to popular cultural investments, and flaunt their wealth before the public. In addition, they also benefited from going to the ballrooms themselves. All kinds of people, from notorious gangsters to state politicians, could sit side by side there. In the ballroom, national capitalists seized opportunities to communicate with each other by chatting and enjoying the "flesh and fragrance" service

Province, Four Families in Nanxun), Beijing, Chinese Social Science Press, 2008, 240.

²⁹ Sun Qin'an, *Shanghai bailemen chuan qi* (The Legend of Shanghai Paramount Ballroom), Shanghai, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2010, 31. I have already read about "Gu's family won excellence in Philadelphia World Fair in 1922," and according to my interview with Liancheng Gu 's son and local scholars in Gu's hometown, Gu's silk products were indeed sent to an exposition in America. In fact, the Philadelphia World Exposition was held in 1926, so probably the legend was true, but erroneously dated.

which would further benefit their businesses. Moreover, these dancing girls were also part of the contemporary fashion world of Shanghai. In addition to their nightly presence, they were part of at least one fashion show that was held at the Paramount in the mid-1930s. (Fig. 26) In the new fashion style, soft silks outlined the female body. The models were not only putting their bodies on display; they became the physical advocates of the modern culture. Women's bodies were used here to present a new style of costume and fashion trend to the public. Thus the Paramount would become an effective backdrop and its activities an efficient advertising strategy for the silk business run by its main investor, Gu' family.

Figure 9. Gu Jingzhai (from *Zhejiang sichou mingshang juzi, nanxun sixiang*)

Figure 10. Gu Liancheng (from *Zhejiang sichou mingshang juzi, nanxun sixiang*)

Site Selection

The location of the Paramount was in line with Gu's economic and commercial interests. It was situated at the corner of the Jessfield Road (renamed Wanhangu Road) and Yuyuan Road, located between the International Settlement and the French Concession, (Fig. 8) in an area adjacent to the Frenchtown-- the westernmost of the foreign settlements, which was expanded by the French Concession between 1914 and 1946.

While Shanghai's financial prosperity in the 1930s was "epitomized by the glamour of the Bund and Nanking Road,"³⁰ Frenchtown, including the Jing'an Temple district, was the residential and entertainment center of urban Shanghai, it "backyard garden." It was composed of clubs, ballrooms, cafés, cinemas, and horseracing grounds, all of which manifested the life-style of Shanghai's foreigners.³¹ After the Paramount opened, the Metropolitan Garden, Ciro's, and other ballrooms began to flourish along the Bubbling Well Road (renamed Jing'an Temple Road, today called Nanjing Road). Gu's ambition was realized in his "making a masterly opening move and standing head and shoulders above others."³²

More importantly, this section of Shanghai belonged to the district surrounding the Jing'an Temple, quite a distance from the bustling central areas of Avenue Joffre and the Bund. The ballroom itself was not only located in the entertainment district, but the location was in a buffer zone neither that was near business nor residential areas, and was far removed from the sites that would have sparked moral controversy.³³ Gu had wanted

³⁰ Samuel Y. Liang, *Mapping Modernity in Shanghai: Space, Gender, and Visual Culture in the Sojourners' City*, 11.

³¹ Deke Erh, Tess Johnston, *Frenchtown Shanghai, Western Architecture in Shanghai's Old French Concession*, Hong Kong, Old China Hand Press, October, 2000, 2.

³² Sun Qin'an, *Shanghai bailemen chuan qi*, 35.

³³ Since the 1940s, the Republican government took "prohibitions of dancing," which even triggered later processions

a feeling of relative independence and distance from both the bustling economic centers of the city and the tranquility—perhaps tedious—of residential districts, and the Paramount’s location gave an opportunity for middle-class men to escape from their daily lives, to a place of pleasure and delight. Yang’s design created such a comfortable and delightful atmosphere. It fulfilled Gu’s expectation that the Paramount should surpass “any other ballrooms in Shanghai” in both ambiance and style.³⁴

of dance hostesses. See Ma Jun, *1948: Shanghai wuchao an* (Study of the Dancing Procession in 1948 Shanghai), Shanghai, Shanghai Shiji Publishing House, 2005, 12.

³⁴ “Bailemen zhi juexing” (The Construction of the Paramount Ballroom), *The Chinese Architect*, Vol. 1, 1934, 9-11.

CHAPTER III

LIGHT, HEAT, AND POWER: THE ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN OF THE PARAMOUNT

The ballroom, new to Chinese entertainment architecture, became popular in Shanghai for two primary reasons: it fed the enthusiasm for the increasingly popular new dance style, and it also satisfied the entertainment needs of the growing middle-class communities. Further, it also represented the cultural values of modern Shanghainese who were eager to distance themselves from the past. The flood of new ideas and the critical thinking promoted by the May Fourth Movement of 1919 transformed the society. The new ideology called for new social relations between men and women, while the close physical contact of ballroom dancing directly contravened the traditional mores. The beats of Western jazz bewitched Chinese hearts, even though modern dance conflicted with Confucian morality, *nannü shoushou buqin* (“men and women must keep a distance during social interactions”).³⁵

Different Spatial Experience

Within the new architectural designs, the clients and dancing hostesses created new spatial experiences that differed from the traditional Chinese use of entertainment spaces,

³⁵ Andrew D. Field, “Selling Souls in Sin City: Shanghai Singing and Dancing Hostesses in Print, Film, and Politics, 1920-49,” Yingjin Zhang ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, 99.

such as that of the theater house. In this typical amusement space, the actor performed on a stage that protruded outward into the audience, surrounded by the audience members on three sides, who were sitting around at tables watching the performances.³⁶ The functional space was clearly divided: the stage, seats and tables defined not only the space between actors and audience but also the interaction between men and women.³⁷ Though the seating was “mixed,” men and women were kept a respectful distance apart. In other words, the spatial division of the theater house preserved the complementary observing/performing roles of “watching (only by viewers) and performing (only by actors)” of the audience and performers in the Chinese traditional entertainment space. The theater space was divided by actor and audience, performing and watching, and limited by the Confucian gender precepts.

The Western style of social dancing became increasingly popular; it differed from the traditional Chinese form of entertainment, and presented a completely new form. As an excerpt from a poem published in a local newspaper quipped, “A few cups make them drunk/ With no reason they begin to hold their hands together to dance/And their shoes move together in time.”³⁸ Social dancing demanded a new type of facility for this innovative amusement, a large and broad space for men and women to dance together, the ballroom.

In this space, people had a completely different experience from what they had had in the past. The dancers now played the dual roles as the performers and the audience.

³⁶ Delin Lai, “The Sun Yat-sen Memorial Auditorium: A Preaching Hall of Modern China,” *Chinese Architecture and the Beaux-Arts*, Cody, Jeffrey W.; Steinhardt, Nancy S.; Atkin, Tony eds., Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2011.

³⁷ Although under the influence of the modern theatrical reform movement, the theaters in Shanghai also started to create new stages. Such new stages began to adopt modern architectural technology by abandoning the old teahouse-style pillared square stage open to the audience on three sides and by building a crescent-moon-shaped stage with movable central structures, mechanic devices, lighting, and settings. The seating arrangement also changed from the clumsy tea-tables and boxes to long rows of chairs. Ou-yang Yuqian, *Tan wenmingxi*, (A Discussion of Modern Drama), *Historical Documents of Chinese Fifty Years' Drama Movement*, Beijin, China Theater Book Press, 1958.

³⁸ *Hu bei xi ren zhuzhici*, *Shen Bao*, May 29, 1872.

They had the freedom to change roles and to personally participate in the performance by entering into the social space. They were not only the dominant figures in the activities and space, but also objects to be appreciated by others as well. The overall atmosphere, social function, and spatial attributes of this new form of entertainment space clearly had caused great changes. The original limited stage gave way to a venue of collective, open, popular, and socialized culture, reflective of the new Shanghai.

Plan of the Paramount

While ballrooms of the late nineteenth century were designed within the hotels, the ballrooms of the 1930s became independent buildings and places of entertainment.³⁹ The Paramount, however, was designed as a complex building with the ballroom only as the main part, and with wings serving both the functional requirements and the economic considerations of the new social dance. To accommodate both the flow of customer and the objections of the police department (explained below), Yang designed the three-level building based on an L-shaped plan. Two wings met at the main entrance on the corner of Jessfield and Yuyuan Roads. This was not only necessary for the convenience of the guests entering and leaving the ballroom but also to increase the dramatic effect of the façade.

This entrance had been designed with the cooperation of the reluctant police department to place the main entrance on the principal roads with a towering beacon at the apex of the building. According to Yang, in the report “The Construction of the Paramount Ballroom,” during the three months of design and the subsequent nine months of construction, “the standard [modern] construction technique” was not the only necessity. Given the “sanitary and traffic concerns,” Yang and his associates had to deal with local authorities to acquire a license. The local police department rigorously attempted to block the blatant display of luxury, and was reluctant to accept such a magnificent entrance to a corner building. They believed that the parking in front of this luxurious corner entrance would block the north-south traffic, and insisted that Yang

³⁹ Zhang Wei, *Hu du jiu ying* (Old Photos and Stories of Shanghai).

relocate the entrance along Jessfield Road.⁴⁰ After protracted negotiations, however, the police authority relented and reluctantly approved the corner entrance.

Yang had absorbed the Western architectural synthesis of hotel and ballroom, combining spaces for entertainment, catering, and accommodation. In terms of function, Yang believed “such a large scale place for congregation... it should have a broad kitchen.”⁴¹ He allotted half of the ground floor on the Jessfield Road wing to the kitchen. In addition, recognizing commercial needs he devoted the other half and the ground floor on the Yuyuan Road for use as retail rental spaces. The dance floor and a gathering hall were on the second floor with upper balconies above Jessfield Road, and the second and third levels on the opposite wing served as a hotel. Yang had achieved a modern architectural synthesis of hotel and ballroom complex. (Fig. 11)

Western-style hotels appeared in Shanghai in the early part of the twentieth century. They emphasized more than the traditional catering function, and were enlarged to include broader entertainment spaces: café, bar and ballroom. Early well-known hotels such as the Astor House Hotel (also known as Richards’ Hotel and Restaurant) and the Majestic Hotel included interior ballrooms.⁴² Later, when ballrooms appeared as independent public entertainment spaces, insightful entrepreneurs such as Gu incorporated hotel rooms into the basic ballroom plan to attract more clients.

Yang explained, “I am designing [the hotels with rooms] for those customers who would prefer tranquility over clamor.” In these environments, the ambiguous nature of the dancers’ roles lent a certain quiet mystery to the design. When male customers were bored with the dance with the dance hostess, the Paramount provided many accessible

⁴⁰ “Bailemen zhi juexing” (The Construction of the Paramount Ballroom), *The Chinese Architect*, Vol. 1, 1934, 9-11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Sun Qin’an, *Shanghai bailemen chuan qi*, 188.

rooms. These independent ballrooms with small rooms for individuals not only functioned as hotels for accommodation, but further they provided a more private and protected environment for “decent” middle-class men. In comparison with hotels where the public would criticize procurement and prostitution, it stands to reason that potential prostitution became acceptable here as patrons took a dancing girl with them back to a room inside the building after dancing, and they thus escaped the disapproving eye of the public.

Figure 11. The plan of the first-floor of the Paramount (from *The Chinese Architect*, No.1 1934)

Outside the Paramount

The building plan was not the only element the architect translated from the West to Shanghai. The Paramount exemplified a combination of Art Deco style and that of modern skyscrapers and became a benchmark of contemporary design. The marriage of Art Deco and the skyscraper created an aesthetic associated with urban modernity. The façade decorated with vertical strip windows, streamlined surface, and simple geometric lines recalled the Art Deco style in American cities, New York in particular, which incorporated the style into soaring skyscrapers, the monuments of America's fabulous twenties, typified by the Rockefeller Center, Radio City Musical Hall, and the Chrysler Building. The windows of the Chrysler "were detailed to give a sense of vertical forces,"⁴³ for honoring the building's monumental 319-meter height, while the stainless steel spire represented the city's great business achievements. The combination symbolized a spirit of "something new and different, something exciting and unorthodox, something characterized by a sense of *joie de vivre* that manifested itself in terms of color, height, decoration."⁴⁴

While the keystones of modernity, which T.J. Clark identified as "leisure, consumption, and the spectacle and money" found their place in the ballrooms of Shanghai. The Art Deco associated with social dancing flooded into the city. Art Deco "blazed its way through the society, accompanied by the latest industrial sophistication and the beat of Jazz drums."⁴⁵ Yang utilized the Art Deco style, apparently envisioning multiple cultural perspectives. Shanghai in the 1930s was not only the financial and

⁴³ William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, New York, Phaidon Press Inc, 2010, 224.

⁴⁴ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 11; Patricia Bayer, *Art Deco Architecture: Design, Decoration, and Detail from the Twenties and Thirties*, 8.

⁴⁵ Deke Erh, *Shanghai Art Deco*, 14.

commercial center of China, but also a melting pot of Chinese and foreigners, within which the cultures of East and West both conflicted and merged. Shanghai soon became a city famous for consumption and entertainment.⁴⁶ Its more than three hundred cabarets and casinos in 1936,⁴⁷ showed the city's fascination with Western dance and a new and flamboyant style of life.

The world of the 1930s was no longer under the "Victorian glory" of British colonial control.⁴⁸ The United States of America was an emergent nation reliant upon its industrial power, and the culture that followed was soon embraced without hesitation by modern Shanghai. In fact, since the late 1920s "multistory buildings on the Bund had begun to rise as a result of the development of new construction materials and techniques in America."⁴⁹ American skyscrapers that were incorporated into urban Shanghai popularized the Art Deco style, representing a modern philosophy of life and the fantasy world Hollywood studios brought to its people.

The Cathay Theater, constructed in 1930 on a prominent street corner, was one of the early examples to utilize the Art Deco style in Shanghai. It was built with step-like structures on either side of the central spire. The spire was decorated with a striking CATHAY logo shot up into the sky. The vertical molding of the outer walls, brown-faced brick, and long narrow windows characterized typical contemporary Western architectural features, in contrast to traditional Chinese architecture. (Fig. 12)

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern, The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9. According to Lee, beginning in the nineteenth century most of edifices on the Bund were built in the neoclassical style which also imposed by British on their colonial capitals in India and South Africa to express the spirit of empire. The essence of "this revived classicism was a celebration of empire and prosperity as symbolized in the 1897 Jubilee celebration of the sixty-year reign of Queen Victoria." However, by the 1930s, "the era of Victorian glory was over: England was longer the unchallenged master of world commerce." America began its expansion as a new world power.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10, 346; Muramatsu Shin, *The Metropolitan Architecture of Shanghai, 1842-1849*, Tokyo, Parco, 1991, chap.3 on skyscrapers.

Just as the Chrysler Building in New York was “a celebration of self-advancement within the American economic system,”⁵⁰ Yang intended the Paramount to be not only his monument to the fabulous entertainment industry Shanghai of the 1930s, but also a celebration of the rapid growth of China’s industrialization. The representations in the print media emphasized the vertical straight lines of the building materials and straight linear windows which dominated the façade, while the tower and beacon on the corner served as the center of the façade’s design. The outer walls were covered with orange, brown glazed tiles, with a black terrazzo belt course.⁵¹ The nine-meter glass tower surmounted by a spire was another prominent feature of the Paramount. The silhouette was built of diminishing cylindrical shapes clearly meant to convey the impression of a small skyscraper. (Figs. 13.1, 13.2, 13.3)

The glass tower glittered triumphantly in the sky, sheathed in the neon lights which could be seen from miles away. *Shen Bao*’s exaggerated report of “a mirage of red and green electric lights”⁵² reflected Shanghai’s enthusiasm for the acquisition of modern electric development. By the pen of the neo-sensationalists,⁵³ represented by Mu Shiying and Liu Na’ou, the night sky of Shanghai was filled with colorful and bizarre enchantment. In *The Foxtrot of Shanghai*, Mu wrote that “the desires of metropolitan people bloom together with the streetlights.”⁵⁴ The incorporation of Art Deco and industrial materials in entertainment architecture, as displayed in the Paramount and the Cathay Theater, characterized the nightlife in modern Shanghai. (Fig.14.1) In his Chinese

⁵⁰ William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, 225.

⁵¹ *Shanghai you xiu fangdichan jianshang* (Appreciating Shanghai’s Exquisite Buildings), Shanghai Real Estate Educational Center ed., Shanghai, Shanghai Far East Press, 2009, 213. From the photo I took (Fig.13.1), the outer wall of today’s Paramount seems to retain its original color.

⁵² *Ye lan guan wu ji* (Notes of Watching Dancing in Night), *Shen Bao*, July 19, 1927.

⁵³ Neo-sensationalism, a modern literature school appeared in the early twentieth century, which emphasized subjective self-expression.

⁵⁴ Mu Shiying, “Shanghai hu bu wu” (The Foxtrot of Shanghai), *Yezonghui li de wuge ren* (Five in a Night Club), Cemetery, Shanghai, Xiandai Press, 1933, 73.

novel, *Midnight*, Mao Dun wrote in capital letters in English the words “LIGHT, HEAT, POWER,”⁵⁵ expressing his own shock at the arrival of Western modernity and that possibly of all Shanghainese.

The glass tower had functions other than its visual effects. The Paramount originated the use of the “automatic car-call system,” which illuminated the plate numbers of clients’ cars in order to summon their drivers when they prepared to leave. As *The North China Daily* reported vividly:⁵⁶

For the first time in the Far East, guests of a nightclub are to have the convenience of an automatic motor car call system to bring their chauffeur driven cars to the door. This system was designed and installed by the United Engineers, electrical contractors, for the Paramount Ballroom...An attendant, placed in charge of a small row of numbered buttons just within the entrance lobby, obtains the license number from the guest, and by pressing the corresponding buttons, causes the license number to flash into view in large electrical signs placed at strategic points outside the building.

The dramatic entrance and lobby created the effect of a grand stage, giving the customers the feeling of walking into a Hollywood movie. The customers—middle-class men--envisioned themselves as the stars of their own cinema productions.⁵⁷ Here the dual role of guests as performers was demonstrated again. Guests were no longer merely the audiences. Entering the Paramount symbolized the transformation of the patron into a new identity. (Figs. 15.1, 15.2)

Yang’s imagery in the Paramount offered a sharp contrast to the Jing’an Temple, a traditional Buddhist temple in the Chinese palace style situated directly opposite on the Jing’an Si Road. There was no multi-story construction in the architectural language of traditional residential buildings. Traditional Chinese wooden architecture was limited in its possibilities for height, both for practical reasons of construction methods and

⁵⁵ Mao Dun, *Midnight*, Sidney Schapiro trans., Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1979, 1.

⁵⁶ *The North China Daily*, December 15, 1933.

⁵⁷ Andrew D. Field, *Shanghai’s Dancing World: Cabaret Culture and Urban Politics, 1919-1954*, 99.

materials, and out of attention to preserving the traditional aesthetic. The Paramount's height was the "most intrusive addition to the Shanghai landscape."⁵⁸ If the skyscraper in New York was regarded as the "Cathedral of Capitalism,"⁵⁹ the contrast in the buildings of Shanghai suggested that the Paramount was a "modern temple," the visual sign of the rise of Chinese commercial capitalism and a modern way of life. The Art Deco styled façade was the architect's own interpretation of the skyscraper, as the striped windows utilized vertical lines that emphasized its height. The industrial materials—the glass tower, the neon lights, and granite surfaces embodied the architect's aspirations for modern civilization, and those of many Shanghainese. The Paramount became a monument to the prosperity of Shanghai's entertainment industry, and a visual sign as well as cultural symbol of the great development of Shanghai's industrial capitalism.

The Art Deco use of geometric, circular, and simple design also characterized the interior. Circular rooms were popular decorative stylistic employments, and the circular areas under the glass tower were attractive as well as functional.⁶⁰ On the ground floor, the circular lobby created a welcoming atmosphere, and on the upper floor a circular rest area was available to patrons entering or leaving the main ballroom. A circular lounge was placed in the center of this rest area; the men and women's washrooms, the service window, and the smoking room were also located alongside the lounge. The dance hostesses usually awaited guests and relaxed here. Old pictures keep their memories alive, even today. (Figs. 16.1, 16.2)

⁵⁸ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern, The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, 12.

⁵⁹ William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, 225.

⁶⁰ Deke Erh, *Shanghai Art Deco*, 49.

One of Yang's principal concerns regarding the use of Art Deco was that it should serve as a bridge between modernism and consumerism.⁶¹ However, it also mediated the gulf between the modern and the traditional, the Western and the Chinese, and fantastic and real. The modern Art Deco style swept over Shanghai, merging a multitude of cultures, including Chinese, European, and American. The jazz beats, Hollywood inspired fantasies,⁶² and uplifting spirit of simple but bright lines and colors, modern materials and technology of the Art Deco movement were all combined by the architect Yang and translated into the design and construction of the Art Deco temple of pleasure, the Paramount.

⁶¹ William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, 291.

⁶² By 1930s, there were 58 movie theaters (independently operation) in Shanghai. (Lou Jiajun, *Shanghai chengshi yule yanjiu, 1930-1939* (A Study of Shang Entertainment History, 1930-1939), Shanghai, Wen Hui Press, 2008, 87.) Lee gave us a glimpse of the impact of the Hollywood movies on Chinese society. He explained the history of its popularity in Shanghai, and certain affinities of the Hollywood narrative tradition for Chinese audiences: the lavishness of American pictures, their superior direction and technique, and also the "triumph of right over wrong and lived happily ever after" ending as compared with the more tragic or solemn finales of many European films. "Moving going" had become part and parcel of the modern way of life in the metropolis Shanghai. (Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern, The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, 96, 118.) The public audiences and print media of Shanghai embraced the Hollywood movies. Newspapers favored series reports devoted to Hollywood movie stars, which became another embodiment of modern women as well as American Hollywood and industrial culture. (Fig. 14.2)

Figure 12. The present Cathay Cinema (photo taken by the author in August of 2011)

Figure 13.1. Today's Paramount (photo taken by the author in 2010)

Figure 13.2. The column-shaped beacon of the Paramount (from *The Chinese Architect*, no.1, 1934)

Figure 13.3. The column-shaped beacon and the signage format of the Paramount (from *The Chinese Architect*, no.1, 1934)

Figure 14.1. The opening of the Metropol Theater, December 5, 1933 (from *The Shanghai Evening Post*, photo taken by the author in June of 2011)

Figure 14.2. Series reports of Hollywood Stars, December 2, 1933 (from *The Shanghai Evening Post*, photo taken by the author in June of 2011)

Figure 15.1. The entrance of the Paramount, December 15, 1933 (from *The Shanghai Evening Post*, photo taken by the author in June of 2011)

Figure 15.2. The lobby of the Paramount (from *The Chinese Architect*, No.1, 1934)

Figure 16.1. The circular space on the second floor entrance into the lounge (from *The Chinese Architect*, no.1, 1934)

Figure 16.2. The present lounge of the second-floor circular dance floor (photo taken by the author in June of 2010)

Fluid Urban Public Space: Modern, Open and Popular

The dance space available in the Paramount's large modern structure was unprecedented, and its remarkable unique features, large scale, and modern architectural design motifs became well-known in Shanghai. The large size fulfilled Yang's original expectations of creating "the largest and most modern ballroom in Shanghai."⁶³ (Figs.17.1, 17.2) The main dance floor (located on the first floor of the building) measured almost 40 meters long and 20 meters wide.⁶⁴ It was broad enough for nearly 400 dancing couples and was called with slight exaggeration, "a dance floor for a thousand people."⁶⁵

Another innovation in this new type of building was the absence of support columns inside the dance hall, which created the broad congregational space both functionally and visually. The entire three-story building was constructed by reinforced concrete, utilizing a steel skeleton for the first-story main ballroom.⁶⁶ Functionally, the broad dance floor met the needs of the large numbers of couples dancing together, and an unobstructed visual impact was created.

There were several more intimate spaces surrounding the central dance hall. One was a seating space along both sides of the open music stage (for band performances) that faced the main dance floor. Also, a semi-open but accessible bar room was separated from the west sides of the tables and chairs by four columns. Another more intimate space was on the upper-level balcony, which consisted of a smaller dance floor in the center flanked tables and chairs placed in both corridors. Finally, a more enclosed space

⁶³ "Bailemen zhi juexing" (The Construction of the Paramount Ballroom), *The Chinese Architect*, Vol. 1, 1934, 9-11.

⁶⁴ The dance floor is 930m², while the floorage occupies 2250m².

⁶⁵ "Bailemen zhi juexing," 9-11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

located on the upper-floor above the bar, was designed as a banquet room separated by curtains. The second story could accommodate approximately 250 seats, while the first story had more than 400 seats with 75 additional seats in the banquet room.⁶⁷

Yang deliberately divided the space not only to decentralize the clients, but also to create visual balance: the main and smaller dance floors were located on respective stories, tables and chairs separately placed along two dance floors and the two different semi-open and closed spaces. While these seats could serve as many as 800 people, it was important that the overall design would not interfere with the spatial and visual effects when the ballroom was not filled to its capacity. Once guests passed through the entrance onto the ballroom floor, they could dance, sit on chairs placed alongside the dance floor, or drink at the bar; if all seats were occupied, they could go up to the balconies to sit and observe the spectacle below, dance, or have dinner in the more private banquet room. (Figs. 18.1, 18.2, 18.3)

One assumption is that the utilization probably also varied in terms of the difference between open and intimate spaces. We can imagine that the open space catered to general public while the smaller enclosed space was prepared for more rich or powerful people. Dancing girls probably served both groups and adjusted their fees accordingly. It is possible that popular girls were chosen to work in the smaller banquet spaces.

Here, guests played dual roles, both as “actors” and the “audience.” They could “perform” as they danced in the center, but they also could sit around the dance floor to chat, drink and watch others. These fluid spaces designed by Yang were both private and public spaces in which Chinese and Western dancers intermingled. In these spaces, the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

traditional boundaries imposed by social status and class identity that separated masculine and feminine activities were also blurred.

Figure 17.1. The plan of the second-floor of the Paramount with the main sprung dance floor (from *The Chinese Architect*, No.1 1934)

Figure 17.2. The plan of the third-floor of the Paramount with the smaller glass dance floor (from *The Chinese Architect*, No.1 1934)

Figure 18.1. The interior decoration of the Paramount (provided by researcher Zhang Wei of Shanghai Library in 2010)

Figure 18.2. The interior decoration of the Paramount, under the smaller glass dance floor (provided by researcher Zhang Wei of Shanghai Library in 2010)

Figure 18.3. The present interior decoration of the Paramount (photo taken by the author in 2010)

Two Varied Experiences of the Dance floor

The structure of the Paramount incorporated various modern materials and equipment. The reinforced-concrete construction employed not only a mechanical heating and ventilating system to maintain the ballroom's climate throughout the year, but two advanced dance floor systems as well. Two different and unique experiences were created in the main dance floor and that upstairs smaller one. The industrial modernity of the Paramount relied upon the essential modern technique of the "sprung floor." The "modern" interior facilities gained it a name as "the premier ballroom of the Far East." As reported by *Shen Bao* in late 1932 when construction on the Paramount began, it was "among the forest of dance halls in Shanghai, it is hard to find such a perfect one as the recently designed ballroom [The Paramount] ... [which has a] floor with the new material of glittering glass."⁶⁸

The central dance floor was Shanghai's first "sprung floor," which utilized a considerably advanced design.⁶⁹ (Fig. 19) In "Structure of the 'Sprung dance floor'," Yang pointed out that this "sprung floor" was not the steel spring-loaded wooden flooring usually applied, due to its "high-cost and difficult technique." (Fig. 20.1) Instead of using real springs, he invented an ingenious and more economical technique. He used a steel slab supported by lever-modules as the elastic fill, placed movable axles on the top of the steel slab, and then covered with wooden flooring on top. Dancers could feel the sloshing movement, both horizontally and vertically, which gave the sensation of stepping on springs. The movable axles and lever-modules actually replaced the expensive steel springs. Yang constructed the elastic flooring to serve two functions: to allow dancers to

⁶⁸ *Shen Bao*, Vol. 229, Dec. 12, 1932, 352.

⁶⁹ Xiliu Yang, "Tanhuang tiaowu diban" (Structure of the "Sprung dance floor"), *The Chinese Architect*, Vol. 1, 1934, 41-42.

swing with the beat of the music—to their great joy—and to simultaneously serve the structural function of distributing and balancing the load. As he pointed out, the deflection of movable axles (serving the same function as springs) was much greater than placing the floor directly on the lever. (Fig. 20.2)

In addition to the physical enjoyment provided by the sprung floor, the glittering visual impact of the small dance floor in the central balcony on the upper level observers added another dimension to the enjoyment. (Fig. 21) Composed of stalinite underlaid with colored lights, the floor glittered with dancers' movements. In the dark atmosphere of the ballroom, the faces of the dancers were hard to recognize and were shrouded with mystery. The only feature caught at first sight in the dim light was the fast movement of their legs illuminated by the colorful floor, and their erotic charm was highlighted by the contrast. Here Yang created another effect different from that of the main dance floor. While physical enjoyment was enhanced by the new "sprung" dance floor, the stunning surface of the smaller floor on the second level created a second visual impact. Both dance floors contributed to the Paramount's unique reputation, confirming Yang's expectations that it would be the largest and most modern ballroom in Shanghai.

There were two reasons for the architect to choose the wooden structure instead of steel springs. One was the economic advantage of wood's lower cost. Another was Yang's desire to support and encourage the use of materials produced in China.⁷⁰ Though Yang had never been abroad, he nevertheless had a flair for modern design and structural technique. He still emphasized the role of tradition in his interpretation of a traditional amusement place into a new space, based on his own structural explorations. Furthermore, he specialized in the utilization and reformulation of traditional architectural technique,

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

as illustrated in his creation of the unique “sprung floor.” His architectural signature marked the Paramount in many ways which differed from those of other ballrooms in Shanghai, and attracted more Chinese dancers to the site. His fondness for traditional architecture was shown in the design of the Metropolitan Garden Ballroom,⁷¹ designed later than the Paramount, situated at the corner of Majestic Road (today’s Dahua Road) and Bubbling Well Road. Here, Yang adopted Chinese architectural elements, applying the sumptuous Chinese traditional roof structure to a modern entertainment building with an “open-air lawn dance floor, zigzagging paths and golf course.”⁷²

As Western dancing gained popularity in Shanghai, the Confucian moral taboo against interactions between the sexes was broken. The Paramount created a dream-like world with the feeling of a Hollywood stage set, while the bands played jazz on the music stage and men and women danced together with the effects of colored lighting all around them. The ballroom not only became a substantial space illustrating Shanghai’s desire for material consumption and its new cultural mores, but also served as the concrete manifestation of China’s modernization process. All the while, it embodied the local Chinese architect’s own vision.

⁷¹ Fei Huo, “Da du hui hua yuan wu ting” (Metropolitan Garden Ballroom), *The Chinese Architect*, Vol.4, 1934, 18-30.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Figure 19. The main dance floor of the Paramount (from *The Chinese Architect*, No.1, 1934)

Figure 20.1 The cross-section and plan of the steel sprung floor (from *The Chinese Architect*, no.1, 1934)

Figure 20.1 The wooden “sprung” floor utilized by Yang in the design of the Paramount
(from *The Chinese Architect*, no.1, 1934)

Figure 21. The smaller glass dance floor of the Paramount (from *The Chinese Architect*,
No.1, 1934)

CHAPTER IV

EXPERIENCING AND EXPRESSING: THE IMAGERY OF MODERNIZATION

“The largest ballroom in the Far East, with sumptuous and gorgeous architectural structures and exquisite modern facilities ... a paradise in the human world,”⁷³ these were the words used to publicize the opening of the Paramount in *Shen Bao*, Shanghai’s largest Chinese-language newspaper. The mass media stoked the dancing fervor of the Shanghai people. The legendary Paramount also left its mark in contemporary literary works. People in Shanghai remember this ballroom from the novel, *The Last Night of Taipan Chin*, by Kenneth Pai, and from the amorous feelings between the taxi dancers and their guests characterized in *The Foxtrot of Shanghai* by Mu Shiying. The legendary fame of the Paramount, then, was recalled in both textual and visual representations. The ballrooms actually were some of the favorite haunts for these writers. They derived inspiration from their experiences in the ballroom. Mu courted and married a dance hostess. Shi Zhecun, one of the pioneers of Chinese neo-sensationalism, resided on Yuyuan Road. Another very important female writer, Eileen Chang, lived in Eddington House, an apartment located across the road from the Paramount.

This exploration addresses two additional areas of inquiry regarding the status of clients and dance hostesses. Who was dancing in the Paramount? How did the experiences here help construct their image of modern life? As dancers reveled in the

⁷³ *Shen Bao*, March 21, 1933.

Paramount, the modern facilities embodied the material desire for consumption of the Shanghainese in a period of prime economic development during the 1930s. In the early years that ballrooms were first open to the public, as was expected of a high-class entertainment place, every night the Paramount was filled with foreigners and dignitaries. Socialites, debutantes, and celebrities left their footprints there, including General Zhang Xueliang, Miss Zhao Yidi, the great comedian Charlie Chaplin, and the film star Zhou Xuan. (Fig. 22) The Art Deco style and the dazzling neon lights undoubtedly had become the visual signs representing Shanghai's nightlife. As a result, the architectural space transformed itself into a social space.

Going to the Paramount became a very "Western" and "modern" activity, a symbol identifying one's social status through consumption and entertainment. At this time, the clients were among the international and indigenous elite of Shanghai. There, they satisfied their expectations of modern life and culture. The Paramount was a wonderland for neo-sensationalists, "a fantastic urban world of modern glitter as embodied in equally fantastic female figures."⁷⁴ The dream world of the Paramount was enhanced by modern facilities and isolated from business districts and residences. Moreover, the lines of the hostesses' bodies and their smiles contrasted sharply with those featured in Eileen Chang's fiction, the quotidian world with trivial and detailed descriptions of ordinary life.⁷⁵ It was probably for this reason that, even though Chang lived across from the Paramount and depicted dancing scenes many times, there is no record of her having visited the Paramount. In historian Christian Henriot's perceptive analysis of Shanghai prostitution in the early twentieth century, he focused on the transition between dance

⁷⁴ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern, The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, 271.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 271, 381. Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 85.

hostesses and prostitutes, pointing out that people went to the ballroom to dance with popular taxi dancers as if they were going to a high-class brothel, taking it as an important aspect of parading their social position.⁷⁶

Soon after the ballrooms multiplied in the western areas of Shanghai competition intensified between the areas, aligning dancers with different ballrooms. The Paramount's location was expected to access the entertainment market to the west, but its location limited its later competitive ability. As a result, the influential residents of Shanghai gradually gravitated to the more recently opened and more accessible Ciro's, while the Paramount lost some of its clients due to transportation difficulties and its location.

To attract customers, the Paramount had to make some adjustments in its price and services. In this way, although it lost some of its richest and most important guests, it also drew new dancers from the growing and increasingly prosperous middle-class communities.⁷⁷ As the largest industrial, trade, and financial center of the Far East, by the end of the 1920s Shanghai already had a population of 2.7 million, of whom 50,000 were foreign residents. Statistics show that the number of clerks in the business, finance, transportation, education, news and administration agencies had reached over 200,000.⁷⁸ These people with their diversity of careers had spare time and money, now constituted the main customer base of the Paramount.

From a sociological point of view, the Paramount Ballroom, as an important component of modern urban public entertainment, played a unique social role in the

⁷⁶ Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: a Social history, 1849-1949*, Shanghai, Shanghai Guji Publishing House, 2004.

⁷⁷ Sun Qin'an, *bailemen chuan qi*.

⁷⁸ Ren Jianshu, *Shanghai das hi ji* (A Dictionary of Big Events in Modern Shanghai), Shanghai, Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, 1996, 378; Zhang Zhongli, *Research on Modern Shanghai as a City (1840-1949)*, Shanghai, Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2008. Of these nearly 100,000 were working in department stores, 10,000 to 15,000 were working in banks, transportation companies, news establishments and schools, 45,000 were working in foreign companies, and nearly 10,000 were working in administrative agencies.

transformation of modern Shanghai society. This kind of entertainment was enjoyed in an enclosed space cut off from the real world which provided a feeling of independence. Having made a dramatic entrance (a metaphor of stepping on the stage), the customer achieved a longed for transformation of their socially status. This transformation became the realization of a fantasy of many Shanghainese who hoped to be identified as modern or fashionable. Every person from the managers, the taxi dancers, and the guests, could find his or her place as either a performer, a member of the audience, or both.

Figure 22. Charlie Chaplin and Paulette Goddard at the Paramount (photo provided by researcher Zhang Wei of Shanghai Library in 2010)

Women's New Images and the Modern Imagination

With the advent of modern public entertainment spaces like the ballroom, a completely new female image emerged—one that emphasized fashion and agency. The word “popularity” can summarize the general atmosphere that all ballrooms sought, and were one of the places that held all the popularity in Shanghai.⁷⁹ In the experience of the ballroom, the taxi dancers played a key role. As the ballroom dance redefined the gender norms in the public sphere, it also allowed people to reimagine the taxi dancers as bold, attractive, manipulative and independent figures. They constituted an important factor in creating a comfortable atmosphere. In this world, traditional concepts about women were disrupted. Women took on new appearances and learned about new things—high-heeled shoes, stockings, cheongsams,⁸⁰ overcoats, perms, and even how to use a lighter.⁸¹ (Fig. 23) In the social and historical backdrop of the 1930s, the image of ballrooms and taxi dancers changed from targets of criticism to objects of pursuit. The pen of the Shanghai writers and the print media also helped to construct the conceptual discourse of this transformation.

The popularity of ballrooms in the urban life of Shanghai provided a necessary background for the appearance of the new women, even though this environment was somewhat negative.⁸² In *Midnight*, the modern Chinese writer Mao Dun described in detail the arrival of Old Master Wu, who symbolized traditional forces, in Shanghai. He was like a thousand-year-old corpse coming into contact with air and sunlight. What shocked him most was a modern woman wearing a cheongsam that enabled one to see

⁷⁹ Yang Minshi, *Shanghai tiao wu re* (Popularity of Dancing in Shanghai), Feb. 17, 1928.

⁸⁰ Chi-pao, a long, close fitting gown with slit skirt and mandarin collar.

⁸¹ Bao Xiaotian, “Three Dance Girls,” see Andrew Field “Selling Souls in Sin City: Shanghai Singing and Dancing Hostesses in Print, Film, and Politics, 1929-49,” 109.

⁸² Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern, The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, 24.

her skin clearly. This scene sent Old Master Wu trembling until he eventually gave a cry and fainted.⁸³

Old Master Wu represented the innermost confusion of contemporary men in Shanghai. On the one hand, when they stood for modernization they could not stop courting these charming dancers, but on the other hand, when they defended Chinese traditional mores they would rescind public acknowledgement of women who were considered attractive but dangerous. These modern girls were capable of misleading men, outsmarting, and dragging them into insincere romantic unions.

Newspapers and magazines like *Shen Bao*, *Young Companion Pictorial*, and *Women's Magazine* discussed the issues of open interactions between men and women and the demand for a rationalization of the risk factors in social communication. The rhetorical devices provided opportunities to portray the ballroom as a venue of physical love, and for the taxi dancers as modern women available for romantic relationships. The fashionable taxi dancers also promoted the images of modern women in the print media, serving as pin-up girls in magazines, posters, calendars, and other visual representations. The Paramount's popular dancing girl Hu Feng, and the vocalist Zhou Xuan of the Paramount, became the most youthful and fashionable images of Shanghai beauties of that time. Both of these stylish women, with their slender figures and plump faces, appeared in the advertisements of White Cat silk stockings or tobacco companies.

The calendar (Fig. 24) portrays men and women dancing together in a public entertainment space, the ballroom, with two modern beauties in the center attired in fashionable dresses and hairstyles. Modern dress displays their connection with the urban life, and also their self-presentation. The way they display themselves recalls the middle-

⁸³ Mao Dun, *Midnight*.

class female consumers in Impressionists' canvas in the early twentieth-century Paris. Their confident and direct outward gaze invites viewers to imagine the lives of these dancers and the public sphere from which they emerged Shanghai of the 1930s.

The multi-dimensional depictions in the calendar portraits of the taxi dancers represented an aesthetic trend and the pursuit of society at that time, and catered to Shanghai's conception of modern "women." (Fig. 25) Similar to the Paramount itself, these dance hostesses, or their visual representations, were isolated from the real world. They were always young, with sweet smiles and charming bodies and without family or gender constraints. In a seductive slogan from a perfume advertisement, (Fig. 25) highlighting the ambiguous nature of the "Christmas special service," a pretty young girl appears, capitalizing on her own charm while promoting a product that emphasizes femininity as fashion.⁸⁴ The taxi dancers of the Paramount also played a role similar to fashion show models, since their clothing also became fashionable attire for Shanghai women. (Fig. 26)

Through the public entertainment space of the Paramount, modern "femininity" was constructed as the result of both modern society and popular culture. In the early 1930s, when the urban space was modernized it also modified the concept of women by creating and molding the lifestyles as well as their feelings. In turn, the modern women were portrayed as visual representations of Shanghai.

⁸⁴ This poster used a Western female figure and was printed in an English newspaper. Such representations avoided insult to traditional Chinese moral codes.

Figure 23. Taxi dance girls in Shanghai in the 1930s (from *China Heritage*, Issue 5, 2010)

Figure 24. Calendar of dancing scenes (personal collection)

Figure 25. Pin-up a girl in 1930s Shanghai print (photo taken by the author in June of 2011)

Figure 26. Hongxiang Company hosting a fashion show in the Paramount in the middle of 1930s (from *Stories of Old Buildings in Shanghai*)

Women's Experience: Shaping Their Own Discourse of Power

The taxi dancers were the embodiment of the modern working-class girl. Although popular media portrayed them as consumers of luxury goods, these dancers considered themselves not only modern girls wearing fabulous cheongsams and shining jewels, but professional women as well. Their jobs were not easy at all. Miriam Silverberg's concept of the contemporary Japanese café waitress sheds some light on the dual roles of the group of female dancers in Shanghai.⁸⁵ Dancers made money from selling eroticism (not necessarily sex) to men. Today, women in public space would be viewed from two dimensions, on the one hand as middle-class consumers, and on the other as working women.

As Silverberg explained, "she was commodified as an erotic object; at the same time she articulated her own sensual desires and her protests against the constraints of her workplace." In other words, although men thought it was romantic to dance with a taxi dancer, the eroticized woman herself probably believed—"there is nothing romantic about the nature of my job." These taxi dancing women had no husbands but multiple male patrons instead. They supported themselves through outsmarting those men who wanted to take advantage of them, physically or financially, and winning them over with their feminine charm and seduction.

Feminist issues were topics frequently discussed in the late nineteenth century Shanghai. Famous Chinese philosophers such as Youwei Kang, Shi Hu, and Xun Lu started to advocate for the social and cultural liberation of women.⁸⁶ Hu intended to bring

⁸⁵ Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense, The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009, Part II.2, "The Café Waitress Sang the Blues," 73-105.

⁸⁶ A great number of publications subsequently focus on the topic of feminism, tracing far back to 1903 when Jin Yi first posed the "women's right of working" in his book *Nü Jie Zhong* (Alarming in Feminism). There are also a number of contemporary publications from which I get much inspiration, Suwen, *Female and Modern China*, Shanghai,

the Western liberation ideology into China by advocating what he called the “American women’s spirit.” He asserted that “the social career of American women not only symbolized personal independent spirit, but also represented the entire feminist enterprise.” He called on Chinese women to learn from the American pioneers to go out, get occupations, and obtain an independent economic status.⁸⁷

Subsequently, more modern urban women distanced themselves from their families and other tradition-bound groups within China when they became professional women. As social attitudes toward the popularization of dancing and the construction of ballrooms shifted, being a professional taxi dancer developed as a viable option for women in Shanghai. Although women sought employment, the economic necessity, specifically the lack of available jobs combined with a fair income provided by the ballrooms, forced them to become taxi dancers.⁸⁸

The taxi dancers of the Paramount were self-managed modern professional women. Though sex was not a necessity, if a taxi dancer wanted more business, she had to stay marketable and be familiar with how to handle men. The competition was relentless. She needed not only natural beauty, but also professional and adept dancing skills. A background with higher education probably enabled them to communicate with an upper class clientele, for example. Unlike prostitute, dancing girls possibly had to sell not just their bodies, but their knowledge as well. Flexible social skill would also be crucial for the dance hostesses. The dancing girls could advance their dancing skills through practice. Therefore if they wanted to move ahead of other girls, they had to develop other skills.

Renmin Press, 1986. Xu Anqi ed., *Gender Studies in Social and Cultural Transition*, Shanghai, Social Science Press, 2005.

⁸⁷ Hu Shi, “American Women,” *Xing Xingjian* (New Youth), 1919.

⁸⁸ Zhang Jenin, “linglei de modern, tenxun Shanghai wunü, 1927-1945” (Shanghai Modern, a Study of Shanghai Dancing Girls, 1927-1945), Jiang Jin ed., *minguo Shanghai nüxing wenhua jiedu* (Performing Women in Republican Shanghai), Shanghai, Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2010, 195-197.

For example, when men were dancing with these girls, the taxi dancers tried to do was to prolong the dancing as long as possible because each dance was paid for by the patron according to the amount of time. She possibly used the ploy “let me tell you something,” and then told stories that would never end. That was one typical so-called “trick” of the dancing girls.⁸⁹

Furthermore, these dancing girls had to take control in the “romantic” relationship. The taxi dancer in the above portrayal was a rational actress within her own economic context, exercising a significant degree of choice over those with whom she associated.⁹⁰ Courting was never an easy mission for clients. The gifts, jewelry, clothing and purses, were all necessities, and showing up and paying for the dances was also required. The bargaining power of the dancing hostesses in the romantic relationship was realized and held through the girls’ lukewarm and ambiguous “tricks.” In a sense, in the “love games” between dancers and customers, these women were not the passive victims or the vulnerable group. Instead, in the relationship without marriage contracts and traditional moral constraints, the dancing girls set up the rules of their own will, dealing with men by using tactful and skillful tricks.

The most popular girls working in the Paramount, like Zhou Hongmei and Chen Manli, earned fair incomes. (Figs. 27 28) The popular taxi dancers could make 3000 to 6000 *yuan* a month, “ten times that of an ordinary clerk”⁹¹, and even “the secondary taxi dancers made between 150 to 200 *yuan* a month and ordinary ones about 100 *yuan*”.

(Fig.29) The high income of the taxi dancers attracted not only girls from ordinary

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 202. Here I mean “trick” or “tricks” in the sense of “ploys,” “strategies,” or “cheats,” not the American slang term for a prostitute’s customers and business activities.

⁹⁰ Andrew Field, “Selling Souls in Sin City: Shanghai Singing and Dancing Hostesses in Print, Film, and Politics, 1929-49,” 111.

⁹¹ Xue Liyong, *Shanghai zhanggu cidian* (A Dictionary of Anecdotes in Shanghai), Shanghai, Shanghai Social Sciences Publishing House, 1999.

families but also those who had already emerged from traditional family constraints such as film stars, courtesans and students, even though they had already walked out of the family confinement.

The early ballrooms were very strict with their clients and even stricter with the taxi dancers, so it was not easy to join their ranks. The Paramount, which regarded itself as a high-class place from its very beginning, employed only forty taxi dancers and therefore established a very strict set of qualifications for girls to work as dancing partners. It accepted only girls who had passed their rigorous auditions and met the testing criteria.⁹² However, after the 1930s, with the increasing number of commercial ballrooms, the nature of the ballroom gradually changed from an entertainment space only accessed by elites to a popular entertainment consumption space open to the public. In addition to the taxi dancers, provided by the Paramount, customers were allowed to bring dance hostesses from outside the ballroom as well. The competition among the dance hostesses became increasingly intensive. In this process, the moral threshold for women was also lowered. The popularization of ballrooms and the reduction in the income of taxi dancers contributed to the higher incidence of prostitution among the dancers.

Their dancing careers were able to meet their financial needs, and the closed pleasure-seeking space had a great impact on the transformation of women's lives. The taxi dancers, as long as they were able to "expose their legs and send off their coquettish smiles, could in exchange get whatever they wanted."⁹³ Compared with traditional housewives, they possessed the freedom and right to control their own money and time. Although modern women controlled their own power discourse here, it is unfortunate that

⁹² Lu Qiguo, "bailemen, Shanghai de wubu" (The Paramount Ballroom, Shanghai Dancing), *Chinese Heritage*, May 1, 2010.

⁹³ Nali, "Yige wunü de zishu" (Narrative of a Dancing girl), *Shehui Zhou Kan*, April 28, 1946.

the transformation of these women was still carried out inside the ballroom—a space dominated by males. The taxi dancers themselves were often trapped in a whirlpool of different conflicts. The playwright Cao Yu exposed the disharmony of this space represented in the character of a fallen dance hostess, Chen Bailu, who died tragically in *Sunrise*.⁹⁴

However, the ballroom did provide a precious area for the activities of women in Shanghai other than their homes and the limited professional choices of professions open to them.⁹⁵ The mobility between classes became a possible option to both middle-class men and dancing hostesses. Modernity in the ballroom exemplified the meaning of T. J. Clark's phrase, "fluidity of class in the popular spaces of entertainment." This idea was not only embodied in the modern clothes these women wore, or in the discourse of power they held through both catering to and misleading the male customers, but also in the possibilities for the transformation of their social status. The atmosphere and the interactions between men and women in ballrooms made it possible for these lower class working women to gain popularity and climb the social ladder in rare cases through securing their own wealth and/or fame, but most often by marriage.

⁹⁴ Cao Yu, *Ri chu* (Sunrise), Sichuan, Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1985, 7.

⁹⁵ Hu Junxiu, *Jin dai Shanghai wuting de shehui gongneng—yi ershi shiji sanshi niandai, Shen Bao guanggao wei zhuti de fenxi* (The Social Function of Modern Ballrooms in Shanghai—Based on an Analysis of Advertisements in *Shen Bao* of 1930s), Gan Su, Gansu Social Science Press, 2007, 1.

Figure 27. Popular taxi dancer Qiu Suying of the Paramount (from *Urban Scenic Vista* by Liu Naou)

Figure 28. Popular taxi dancer Chen Manli of the Paramount (from *Ballroom Municipal Administration*)

<i>Expenses:</i>	
Room rent	25 yuan
Board	30 yuan
Social expenses (including movies)	20 yuan
Clothes	54 yuan
Family support (note: this may be unreliable)	200 yuan
Deposit to savings	25 yuan
Total monthly expenses	354 yuan
<i>Income:</i>	
Based on five hours of work per day (ten dances per hour) for a total dance fee of 8.50 yuan.	
Her monthly income is 255 yuan, hence 99 yuan in debt.	
(Note: How such a debt is settled remains a riddle) ²⁷	

Figure 29. The monthly income and expenses of an average dance hostess (Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 27)

Men's Experience: from Architectural Space to Social Space

The ballroom in a sense served as a focal point of male desire on multiple levels. Shanghai in the 1920s and the 1930s was a highly competitive commercial world dominated by men. Statistics show that the gender ratio of Shanghai's urban population was critically unbalanced.⁹⁶ The restless and violent nature of males was undoubtedly the cause of the social unrest in male-dominated Shanghai. The ballroom, however, provided an interior space for relaxation, entertainment and communication outside the home and workplace, and allowed these Shanghai working men to indulge themselves in the comfort of women's company and to forget their worries and fatigue.

As Norbert Elias points out, "the function of relaxation was not only the removal of tension but also the recovery of the measure of tension – one of the essences of spiritual health."⁹⁷ The sensuous ballroom, "like a social safety valve," appeased the uneasiness of males in Shanghai and brought satisfaction and peace to the male world."⁹⁸ Indeed, when their lusts and worries grew, the companionship of the taxi dancers brought them satisfaction and peace in body and mind. The ballroom as a turning point of social stability unconsciously created a kind of life style and was a stabilizing factor in Shanghai's society.⁹⁹

More importantly, the ballroom had become an ideal space that spanned carnal and erotic desire. For men, it provided an alternative to traditional brothels that carried the stigma of indecency and immorality in middle-class communities. It was a milieu that satisfied men's need to approach women, without direct involvement in "the flesh

⁹⁶ Zou Yiren, *Jiu Shanghai renkou bianqian de yanjiu* (A Study on Transformation of Population in Old Shanghai), Shanghai, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1980, 123.

⁹⁷ Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, "The Quest for Excitement in Leisure," Norbert Elias, ed., *The Quest for Excitement*, London, Blackwell, 1996, 89.

⁹⁸ Hu Junxiu, "Social Function of Modern Ballroom in Shanghai."

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

business.” In Lee’s words, “the scattered lights of green or red or purple are turned off many times. This is to make you more eager, because you can touch the dance hostess’s breasts, kiss her cheek or mouth; you can do as you wish.”¹⁰⁰ For dance hostesses, unlike fallen women, were not driven sell their flesh, though it was a possibility, as Chen Bailu did in Cao Yu’s *Sunrise*. The physical contact, though non-sexual, offered a sort of eroticism, because dancing professionally had already labeled these women as girls with loose morals who conducted themselves like prostitutes. For single men in Shanghai, such was the charm of the Shanghai nightlife. The Paramount’s ticket price was as expensive as the expectation it sold. In fact, one ticket was not enough. Most customers would buy two or three *yuan* tickets in order to stay in the ballroom and extend their enjoyment, continuing the fantasy. (Figs. 30.1, 30.2, 30.3).

Consumption at public entertainment place in Shanghai broke down the barriers between different urban classes and blurred the identity of each one. One could assume a temporary identity within this space. The various people in the ballrooms were more or less total strangers to each other. They did not have to maintain their relationships according to their families or by the communities in which they lived. Strangers chose their identities in the social space of the ballroom and socialized within these temporary identities.

In the mid-1930s, “tea dances” and “dinner dances” became popular and lasted from noon until midnight. At those dances, a huge group of strangers/customers met each other for the first time on the grand dance floor. The ballroom therefore played a major role in breaking down the barriers that separated the different urban social classes.

¹⁰⁰ Ting Gaobai, “hua xiao wuchang” (Tales of Dance Hall), *The Times*, Shanghai, Supplement Cartoon, Issue II, 1934, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern, The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, 27.

Figure 30.1. Dance ticket from the Paramount (from *Modern Metropolis: Social Features of Shanghai and Hong Kong*)

Figure 30.2. Dance ticket from the Ciro's Ballroom (from *Modern Metropolis: Social Features of Shanghai and Hong Kong*)

Figure 30.3. Coupon from the Majestic Ballroom (from *Modern Metropolis: Social Features of Shanghai and Hong Kong*)

CONCLUSION: THE GATE TO ONE HUNDRED PLEASURES

The introduction of Western ballrooms started the construction of urban entertainment spaces in modern Shanghai. First available only to foreigners and then to the Chinese public, the places for holding social dancing were transformed from clubs in the foreign settlements to urban spaces to which the people of Shanghai had daily access. Attitudes of Shanghainese toward the new type of entertainment also turned from rejection to welcome. The ballroom became the intersection of a flesh market and an ordinary place of entertainment, situated between immorality and decency, tradition and modernity. Instead of her body, the dance hostess sold erotic expectations to the public through the activities within the ballroom and the images in textual and visual representations.

The Paramount Ballroom of the 1930s was the quintessential legendary dream world, one which created illusions of the modern world. The large and small dance floors of the Paramount created an enclosed fantasy space where one could escape from reality. The luxurious decoration, charming music and beautiful taxi dancers provided a feeling totally distinct from previous places of entertainment. All five senses were stimulated and extremely enhanced after entering “the gate to one hundred pleasures.” Customers enjoyed a feast for the mouth and a feast for the eye, the tasty smell of Western cigarettes and cocktails and the loud beats of Jazz drums, and the modern Shanghai beauty waiting to embrace the clients.

For Shanghai women, the figure wearing high-heeled shoes, stockings, and cheongsam was the modern woman they were expected to be. To a certain extent, as modern professional females, they were beyond being simply objectified by males. Instead, they held the initiative of discourse to use their bodies to stir imagination of their customers. For the middle-class men, dancing girls provided sexual expectation. Their imaginary world of modern life was fulfilled through their experience in the Paramount Ballroom, which was enhanced by the atmosphere of the architectural structure and the modern facilities created for them.

At the unique time when Art Deco, Western-style dance, ballrooms and the Western modern life-style came to Shanghai, and against a specific historical and cultural background, different architects completed their designs for modern ballroom structures. The architectural language of the Paramount was based on a modern structural technique, and its imagery reflected objects of modern engineering that were regarded as symbols of the modern age. The Paramount, with its innovative use of architecture, was financed by a Chinese silk entrepreneur Gu, with great commercial expectations, and designed by a Chinese architect Yang, who hoped to create a new type of amusement space, the ballroom. While foreign capital played an important role in Shanghai, domestic funds were also crucial in financing the construction projects. Yang made full use of the advantages of the Paramount's geographical location to satisfy the expectations of the client in creating a modern entertainment place, making maximum use of the urban space, a process of which involved site selection and the coordination with and cooperation of the concession authorities.

The Paramount building became a symbol of the maturity of Shanghai's entertainment structures. Together with other typical Art Deco style public entertainment buildings (such as the Cathay Theater) from the same period, it served as a successful example of the merging of Western life-style and Chinese civilization. As the most modern urban space of the Far East, it has continuously led the fashion of Shanghai and influenced the city and its people for over half a century. The Paramount served two functions in the construction of modern urban space. It was a place where excitement and stimulus were legalized, and as a meeting point for the maintenance of social stability.

This independent and isolated space changed people's ideas about relaxation and forms of entertainment. It gave birth to new female images. A transitional space from the real world to the fantasy world was created for the people of Shanghai, which provided a safe space of excitement and stimulus. In addition, the psychological space between people was extended. People in this public entertainment space enjoyed themselves fully. The needs of both men's desires and women's survival, as well as their spiritual needs, were satisfied. The architectural space was thus extended to become a social space, and the social function of the Paramount in the transition of Shanghai was made even more prominent.

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