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FROM DECADENCE TO DISILLUSION: URBAN IDENTITY IN MIAN MIAN'S *CANDY*

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Abstract

This paper analyses urban identity in *Candy* (2000) by Chinese author Mian Mian, a prominent figure among the so-called "post-70s" generation. The novel, banned in China shortly after publication, portrays a fragile love story set against the backdrop of two cities. Shenzhen, a fast-growing city emblematic of China's post-Cultural Revolution economic boom, is depicted as anonymous, nameless, and lacking identity despite its wealth. In contrast, Shanghai—Mian Mian's hometown—is portrayed as a city with a rich literary legacy, symbolizing modernity and the sexual freedom of urban Chinese women. After a brief overview of urban identity in Chinese literature, particularly in Shanghai, and situating Mian Mian within her literary generation, the study focuses on the representation of cities and how urban identity in the novel shapes characters and narrative. It also examines the novel's experimental style, which combines simple, colloquial language with occasional shifts in narrator, mirroring the instability and fragmentation of identity in the urban landscapes it depicts. Shenzhen and Shanghai are compared: Shanghai, with its historical and cultural depth, and Shenzhen, a symbol of rapid economic development, depicted as a chaotic space of drug dealers, addicts, pimps, and prostitutes. Both urban settings reflect the vulnerability of the protagonists as they navigate trauma, drug addiction, sexuality, and the search for belonging in post-1989 China.

Keywords

Mian Mian, post-70s writers, urban identity, Shanghai, Shenzhen, contemporary Chinese women

Introduction

Chinese society has undergone profound transformations over the past century. In Chinese literature, urban identity began to emerge as a distinct theme in contrast to the traditionally dominant rural imagery, particularly toward the end of the Qing dynasty. Although Chinese literature had long included portrayals of cities—particularly Chang'an in the Tang and Song dynasties—the modern era marked a shift in which Beijing and Shanghai became the leading urban settings in literary writing. The image of Beijing, for example, appears in the classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢 *Honglomeng*) by Cao Xueqin. Another early urban narrative, the serialized novel *Flowers in the Sea of Sin* (孽海花 *Niehaihua*) by Jin Tianhe and Zeng Pu, published in 1904, is set in both Beijing and Shanghai. The novel portrayed Shanghai as a city of both allure and corruption, focusing on its pleasure districts and the lives of courtesans. The novel depicts the upper class of China living in Beijing and Shanghai during the final 25 years of the 19th century (Doležalová-Velingerová, 2013, 725). This alluring image of Shanghai foreshadowed its rich and enduring literary legacy.

In the early 20th century, calls for national modernization included strong demands to reform language and literature. These efforts intensified during the May Fourth Movement, which also marked the emergence of the first generation of women writers. During this period, the city began to be depicted as a space of both opportunity and alienation, mirroring the rapid social and cultural transformations brought by modernization (Hong, 2007, 404).

The economic and cultural transformation of China resulted in more literature portraying people living in cities, most of which focused on Beijing and Shanghai. A number of modernist short story writers were inspired by the city's international, decadent, and captivating atmosphere, including the melancholic Yu Dafu, the feminist author Ding Ling, and realist writers such as Ba Jin and Mao Dun. The latter's best-known work, *Midnight* (子夜 *Ziye*), vividly depicts the metropolitan milieu of Shanghai amid the financial and social chaos of the post-Depression era. Shanghai as a modern opulent city is prominent in the works by Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), notably in *Love in a Fallen City* (倾城之恋 *Qingcheng zhi lian*), in which she mostly describes lives and love stories of women from the upper society. In the war-torn Shanghai of the 40s, Eileen Chang's novels brilliantly explored the life of ordinary citizens, rather than the more commercial tendency at the time to focus on Europeanization and the city's

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elites. Urban space is a crucial element here. Chang depicts Shanghai and Hong Kong—cities shaped by strong colonial and Western influences, with Hong Kong at the time functioning as a British-administered territory—as spaces where female protagonists searched for personal agency and a gasp of freedom.

Different vision of urban space is described in Ba Jin's *Family* (家 *Jia*), in which the author explores the clash between traditional family structures and the changing social landscape of the city. Lao She is notable for depicting life of ordinary people struggling for their every day's lives, their humour and cultural nuances of urban life. He is mostly capturing life in Beijing. In his novels, notably *Rikshaw* (駱駝祥子 *Luotou xiangzi*), he employed techniques of realism.

After the Second World war, China faced the Great Leap Forward, followed by the Cultural Revolution, which has severely damaged the traditional values in Chinese society. The students heavily influenced by Mao's ideology turned against their parents and teachers. China became isolated from the rest of the world, not only economically but also culturally. After the political reforms of 1979, China opened to the world, and the cultural contacts were re-established. Translations of Western literature and philosophy reignited artistic ambition. In the mid-1980s, a period of "culture fever" (文化熱 *wenhua re*) emerged, as intellectuals and artists—traumatized by previous campaigns—began to create freely across various artistic fields (Hong, 2007, 404). Western pop culture, including rock music, returned after a decades-long absence, contributing to a rapid cultural revival. Writers initially explored Western literary models and themes of personal trauma, especially related to the Cultural Revolution (literature of "scars"), before gradually turning back to Chinese traditions in search of deeper roots.

Urban life has been repeatedly depicted in Chinese literature, and cities have become an integral part of the cultural identities explored by many Chinese writers. Some authors continue in the tradition of realism, such as Wang Anyi, who builds on the literary legacy of Shanghai, particularly in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (長恨歌 *Chang hen ge*). She embodies the poetic style and narrative aesthetics of the Shanghai South, undoubtedly a narrative approach unique to the novel (Liu, 2023). The plot of the novel allows Wang to drift into the half-remembered histories of Shanghai's urban landscape (Haman).

Since the 1980s, mainland China has produced a number of highly individualistic urban novelists, from Liu Suola and Xu Xing to Wang Shuo in the 1990s. However, the cities and characters they depict still largely reflect the habits and influences of the revolutionary era (Humes, 2015). Although Beijing is not always explicitly named in the works of Wang Shuo, his protagonists speak in distinctive Beijinese slang, which is immediately recognizable to Chinese-speaking readers and strongly associates his stories with the capital city. This echoes the work of Lao She, who is also renowned for his vivid use of the Beijing dialect spoken by ordinary people. Shanghai writer Sun Ganlu, writing in the late 1980s, responded to the city's material scarcity and lack of leisure by reimagining it as a delicate urban daydream—transforming revolutionary prose into a revolution of prose and rural utopia into an ethereal vision of the city (Humes, 2015).

Meanwhile, a new generation born in the 1970s matured in an environment shaped by growing openness and commercialization. Disillusionment after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown pushed many writers and artists to withdraw from political engagement and focus instead on individual expression and the opportunities brought by consumer culture. The so-called "beauty writers" (美女作家 *meinü zuojia*), most notably Zhou Weihui (Wei Hui) and Mian Mian, were sometimes praised by Western critics for their boldness, courageous breaking of taboos, and exposing the lives of the free-spirited urban youth, some other time criticized for greedily embracing consumerism and Western influence (Jakubów-Rosłan, 2022, 131). The rapid rise of the "post-70s" writers stems from their talent and their commitment to writing from the heart, which gives them a distinct voice, regardless of mainstream recognition. (Xie, 2007) Wei Hui's novel *Shanghai Baby*, banned in China for sexually explicit content, explores the life of a young urban woman in 1990s Shanghai, focusing primarily on themes of sexual liberation and cultural transformation, rather than serving as a visual or geographical guide to the city. Mian Mian's Candy, frequently mentioned together with Wei Hui's Shanghai Baby, devotes substantial attention to the portrayal of cities and their distinctive urban identities.

While *meinü* writing emphasizes inner states and sensory experience rather than traditional realism, other genres such as science fiction have also begun to explore and narrate urban identity. For instance, Hao Jingfang's short story *Folding Beijing* presents a dystopian vision of the capital city, restructured into three spatial layers inhabited by distinct social classes (Collins, 2023).

The present research focuses on the literary construction of urban identity in Mian Mian's *Candy*. Existing scholarship on the novel has predominantly approached it through the lens of gender and "body-writing." Song Jing (2016) discusses the figure of the *educated urban woman* as a counterpoint to traditional female roles in

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Chinese society, analysing how Mian Mian and Wei Hui depict sexuality from a female perspective; however, her study does not address the identity or representation of urban spaces. Lu Hong's work similarly concentrates on "body-writing," contrasting the gritty physical rebellion and cultural desolation in *Candy* with the cosmopolitan glamour of *Shanghai Baby*. Lu argues that *Candy* exposes the darker effects of the sex-, drugs-, and rock-and-roll lifestyle linked to the Special Economic Zone syndrome and critiques the cultural consequences of transnational capitalism.

Building on this scholarship, the present study shifts the emphasis from gendered corporeality to the spatial dimension of the text by examining how *Candy* constructs the identities of the cities it portrays. Although Mian Mian refers to several locations, including Beijing, only two urban spaces—Shanghai and the unnamed "city in the south" (widely interpreted as Shenzhen)—emerge as central to the narrative. These cities are analysed here in terms of their aesthetic representation, psychological function within the plot, and symbolic significance. The comparison draws on visual, emotional, and cultural dimensions to explore how the novel narrates urban identity in contemporary China.

Although the novel *Candy* has been translated into Slovak by the author of this study, the English translation by Andrea Lingenfelter is used as the primary source in this analysis. This choice is based on several factors. First, Lingenfelter's translation possesses not only linguistic precision but also a high degree of aesthetic and literary quality, capturing the tone, rhythm, and emotional nuance of the original in a way that resonates with English-speaking readers. While the Slovak translation strives to maintain the same literary sensibility, its impact is necessarily confined to Slovak-speaking audiences. More significantly, the version used for the Slovak translation was based on a revised Chinese edition, prepared by the author in 2019 in an attempt to reintroduce the novel into the Chinese market. This version underwent substantial editing, with several passages shortened or removed entirely, altering the novel's tone, narrative structure, and thematic development. For this reason, Lingenfelter's translation—based on the original version—is regarded as more faithful to the author's intent.

1. Mian Mian and the Literary Context

Mian Mian 棉棉 (b. 1970, Shanghai) is a writer, filmmaker, musician, and cultural promoter who emerged as a prominent figure among the so-called "post-70s" generation of Chinese authors at the end of the 20th century. Her literary debut, a short story collection titled *La la la* (啦啦啦), was published in 1997 by New Century Publishing House in Hong Kong. She gained widespread attention with her first full-length novel, *Candy* (糖 *Tang*). Following the publication of *Candy*, Mian Mian became a literary icon for a generation of Chinese readers and gained international recognition. She has published several works, including the short story collections *Every Good Child Deserves to Eat Candy* (每个好孩子都有糖吃 *Meige hao haizi dou you tang chi*) in 2002, Acid Lover (盐酸情人 *Yansuan qingren*) in 2000, the non-fiction *Social Dance* (社交舞 *Shejiao wu*, 2002), and *Panda* (熊猫 *Xiongmao*, English translation: Panda Sex, 2004). In 2019, she released another short story collection, *Vanishing Act* (失踪表演 *Shizong biaoyan*). Alongside her writing, Mian Mian has also been active in contemporary art, electronic music, and film. (ModernSky, n.d.)

Often described as a "literary freak," Mian Mian moves restlessly between Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing, her life marked by music, DJ work, and past struggles with addiction. In *Candy*, she rejects both autobiographical readings and accusations of provocation, insisting her work is "bold and normal," drawn from lived experience rather than performance. She portrays the out-of-control lives of her peers in China's urban youth culture not to glamorize them, but to capture the risky, alienated edge of freedom in the modern city (Xu, 2020).

Candy is the first full-length novel by Mian Mian. It was published for the first time in 2000 but was officially banned within a few months of its release. Despite the ban, *Candy* quickly became a bestseller, widely circulated through pirated copies, and achieved underground cult status in China. The novel, often described as a portrayal of "cruel youth," explores the disaffected lives of young people in Shanghai and Shenzhen. It was translated into English, Dutch, Spanish, Greek, Portuguese, German, Slovak, and other languages. In June 2019, the new version of the book was published by Changjiang Literature Press. Comparing with previous version, which is unavailable in Chinese, only in earlier translations, new version erased significant amount of text. It simplified the plot and, more importantly, removed many of the sexually explicit passages. The author denied to be labelled as dissident and never claimed any political connotations of her changes. She claimed that she did not feel that the novel represented her aesthetics and new literary standards.

The story of *Candy* can be read as a love story. The protagonist, a young girl named Hong, leaves Shanghai for a southern city, where she falls in love with the musician Saining. Their on-and-off relationship is marked by emotional turmoil—they cannot live together, yet cannot separate. Saining, a talented but spoiled child of wealthy

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overseas Chinese, becomes addicted to drugs and has an affair, while Hong struggles with the trauma of a friend's death. After Saining disappears, she spirals into drug use and casual sex in an attempt to forget him or punish herself. Following several stints in drug rehabilitation centre, Hong ultimately redefines herself as a writer, exploring her sexuality and attempting to build a romantic relationship with her former friend Kiwi—only to discover that he is more attracted to men and infatuated with their mutual friend Apple, whom Hong had dated as a teenager before he came out as gay. Saining eventually reappears, but Hong, still hurt, is unable to rekindle their relationship despite his determination.

The novel ultimately becomes a portrait of two fragile individuals scarred by traumatic experiences, struggling to find meaning in their lives. It frequently depicts urban imagery, focusing primarily on Shenzhen and Shanghai.

Candy has been often compared to *Shanghai Baby* written by Wei Hui, another "beauty writer". According to Susan Mann, "Their heroines were seriously obsessed by the consumer society and culture that surrounded them. They were after whatever they could get. However, they could get it, in the global sex market" (Song, 2016, 109). In *Candy*, Mian Mian combines feminist narrative and hooliganism into a rebellious and sharp style of writing (Zhu, 2006). She was often criticized for her direct and sincere capture of sexual activities that were perceived as an attempt to trickle the readers' attention, a kind of adaptation to market demands. Simple language contrasts with her highly sophisticated style of writing, which ranks the novel as an avant-garde.

Unlike Coco in *Shanghai Baby*, Hong is more fragile, emotionally unstable, and often loses control over her life. This emotional vulnerability defines her character—she is not a strong urban heroine but a wounded, fragile girl, haunted by obsessions, drug addiction, and traumatic experiences, including the suicide of a close friend during secondary school and sexual abuse by her classmates. Even her first sexual encounter with Saining is rough and arguably non-consensual.

2. Urban Identity, gender, and the cities of Shenzhen and Shanghai in *Candy*

The identity of a city combines various geographical, architectural, cultural, historical, and social characteristics, as well as how the city is perceived by its inhabitants or newcomers and represented in literature and art. In urban studies and environmental psychology, this notion is grounded in Proshansky's influential concept of place identity—the aspects of the self-shaped through interaction with the physical environment (Proshansky, 1978; Proshansky et al. 1983). Building on this foundation, Lalli (1992) further specifies urban identity as the dimension of self-identity that derives from attachment to, and perceptions of, the urban environment.

In Candy, two Chinese cities play a central role in the unfolding of the plot. Given the long history of China, both are relatively young urban spaces. Shenzhen, a symbol of rapid economic growth in southern China and a representative of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ), contrasts sharply with the author's native Shanghai—a city frequently depicted in Chinese literature. Each city is described in the novel as shaping the characters' experiences, and the juxtaposition between them foregrounds differing forms of urban identity and perception. The contrast is not merely geographical; it embodies distinct modes of life, emotional registers, and senses of belonging. While Shanghai evokes nostalgia for its golden age of the 1930s and carries an undertone of decay, Shenzhen is marked by relentless development and a pervasive sense of detachment and rootlessness.

Shenzhen was built after the end of the Cultural Revolution in the era of Chinese modernization, also at the place of a small fishing village, but according to plans of Chinese government. It is a symbol of China's reform era, fast-growing economy and a frontier of opportunity. Unlike Shanghai, it was rarely ever mentioned in literature. In *Candy*, the lack of identity is prominent.

Shanghai is one of the cities frequently depicted in literature. Shanghai was opened to the world as a commercial port after the end of the First Opium War in 1843. As a result of the war, British, American, and French "concessions" (or enclaves) were set up successively in 1845–46. After the First Opium War (1839–1842), Shanghai was among the cities forcibly opened to foreign trade, a period the Chinese refer to as the "century of humiliation." The British, Americans, and French established their concessions outside the original city walls, and the city's architecture came to reflect strong Western influences, distinguishing it from traditional Chinese urban forms. Scholars such as Jackson (2017) and Yeh (1990) have shown that this hybrid semi-colonial structure profoundly shaped Shanghai's urban identity and social fabric. By the 1930s, Shanghai had become a space of pleasure, disillusionment, and decay, but also one of modernity—a symbol of sexual freedom for women and a centre of fashion and urban lifestyle. Studies of this period (Lee, 1999; Henriot, 1993; Zhang, 2005) further demonstrate how Shanghai's cosmopolitan environment, entertainment culture, and visual modernity contributed to its unique literary and cultural representation.

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Some critics have classified Mian Mian as a representative of urban educated women, in contrast to the rural female figures that dominate much of modern Chinese literature—an association the author herself has resisted. Unlike traditional portrayals of women as primarily family-oriented and morally restrained, the works of urban female writers often address topics long considered taboo, including sexuality, drug addiction, alcohol, violence, and prostitution, thereby exposing the unsettling realities of contemporary urban life.

By openly depicting sexual experience, drug use, prostitution, and the urban underworld of Shenzhen from a female perspective, *Candy* attracted considerable public attention and controversy. Although the novel was officially banned for its "polluting content," Mian Mian herself did not attribute the ban directly to her gender, but rather to the book's popularity and the public discourse it generated. As she remarked, "I think it was because the book became so popular that all of the newspapers started writing about sex and drugs" (Loewenberg, 2004). Nevertheless, the scandal surrounding *Candy* suggests that such themes were perceived as particularly transgressive when articulated from a female point of view, revealing a gendered imbalance in the cultural acceptability of literary transgression in contemporary China.

3. Shenzhen: The Escape and the Disillusion

Shenzhen is a newborn city, a product of engineering, and a symbol of fast growing Chinese economic. Established in 1979 as China's first Special Economic Zone, Shenzhen has become a model for rapid urban development in China and other developing countries. Perceived as a planned "instant city" that achieved an unprecedented speed of growth and economic success, Shenzhen has not outwardly displayed the urban problems related to rapid population growth that are common in other developing counties. However, the reality is that half of Shenzhen's present population of 20 million lives in dense urban blocks that exist outside of the city's formal zoning regulations and building codes control. The 1986 Shenzhen Master Plan projected that the city would achieve a population of 1.1 million by the year of 2000. Yet by 2000 the actual population had already reached 10 million (Du, 2018, 99).

Both cities are relatively new and strongly influenced with something which could be identified as Western lifestyle. Shanghai gained its reputation as a decadent city and it attracted many writers since start. Unlike Shanghai, a city strongly established in new literary tradition, Shenzhen hardly entered the map of Chinese literature; only a single well-known connection happened after *Candy* was published and banned. Young poet, working for Foxconn company, Xu Lizhi, who died in his age of 24, by a suicide in Shenzhen in 2014, gained posthumous recognition for the poetry he wrote while enduring harsh factory conditions, making his voice a powerful symbol of urban alienation in contemporary Chinese literature (Fan, 2017, 189). Suicide is, in some ways, connected to the city. Xu ended his life there, and the motif of suicide appears several times in *Candy*. Hong frequently struggles with suicidal thoughts. Mian Mian expresses her view on the subject: "Everyone knows that someone is committing suicide." (Sohu, 2001)

In Candy, Shenzhen serves as the setting in which the novel begins. Driven by painful memories, Hong heads to southern China, to Shenzhen. Interestingly, the city was never named in the novel, unlike Shanghai, Hong Kong, Beijing, or Nanjing. Referred to only as "a city in the south," its anonymity emphasizes the fast-growing city's lack of identity and marginal cultural significance. In the 1990s, however, the raw atmosphere of the Special Economic Zone on the border with Hong Kong offered artists, especially musicians, a unique sense of freedom—an opportunity to achieve success or at least live independently amid the chaos of rapid economic reform and newfound wealth. (Zhang Cziráková, 2022).

Mian Mian's stories often revolve around her experiences living in Shenzhen during the early to mid-1990s. According to Jonathan Napack, it was "the most lawless and chaotic time in the notorious border town´s short history". "There are no old people in that city" Mian Mian says of Shenzhen. "Everyone was so young". Many people migrated to Shenzhen with the belief that money could provide a new beginning or a means of personal survival. "That kind of existential void, a place with no history and consequentially no family or community ties, resulted to a cannibalistic society." (Napack, 2001).

Mian Mian's introduction of Shenzhen is an extravagant intensification of reality, much like the Shanghai of earlier Chinese famous authors like Eileen Chang, a threepenny opera of gangsters, prostitutes and beautiful, doomed musicians – women with a past, as the saying goes, and men with no future (Lu, 2011, 40).

> The street outside of our apartment windows was the most famous street in the town. On either side it was packed with unbroken rows of shops and big all-night restaurants. Every evening, as night fell, the street filled with throngs of women… Diagonally across the street from our building was a big

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> movie theatre, a theatre that doubled as a place of business for the sex trade, mostly blow jobs or what they called "airplane rides" – hand jobs. (Mian, 2003, 51-52)

Shenzhen in *Candy* became a city without past, without history, and, above all, a city without any identity, not even worth to mention its name. It has been described thorough the lens of the lowest strata society: city of prostitutes, pimps, drugs, drug addicts, drug dealers, but also petty cheaters, and dodgy businessmen, trying to make a fortune, people earning and losing money too fast to be able to realise it. It is a transfer station, both geographical and symbolic, between China and Hong Kong, a place, where people tried to get their fake documents in order to flee to Hong Kong. In the novel, in Lu Hongwei words, Mian Mian exposes the social-psychological climate of Shenzhen and the misspent lives of a lost generation of troubled youths (Lu, 2011, 42). It is clear that the city was Shenzhen, as the author admitted in interviews, but still, in *Candy*, she refused to call it by its name. All parts of the novel, where she mentioned it, it was just "a city", or "a town":

> It was just a city street. But in the days that followed, I could stop thinking about that street. And while those memories tormented me, that street was still when I had grown up. In the old days, the street was populated with prostitutes, pimps, johns, drug dealers, young girls selling flowers, beggars, and shish kebab vendors. Later on, the police descended on the place, a lot of police, and you didn´t see all those people anymore. The street was gone; those warm but terrifying sounds were gone. The stores also disappeared, and the new high-rises went up in either side of the road. (Mian, 2003, 124)

This urban anonymity mirrors Hong's struggle with her identity, depicts her insecurity about her love life and life in general. This nameless identity of Shenzhen—a fast-growing city on the border near Hong Kong—stands in stark contrast to the other cities mentioned in the novel. Even Beijing, which is not central to the story and only occasionally visited by the protagonists, is more specifically referenced. The author mentions places like "the most expensive place" (Mian, 2003, 52) — famous Hotel Wangfu situated in the city centre, close to Wangfujing Street— or Zhongguancun, a suburb that would later become known as China's "Silicon Valley" and even lend its name to a television series. Mian Mian describes a moment in Beijing when Hong meets Saining at the Capital International Airport. She captures a striking image of the city: "The winter sunlight of Beijing, with its quality so unique to this place, poured over our bodies and when I looked around the city, a city we'd once yearned for more than anything in the world, I saw that particular sunlight illuminating our personal disaster" (Mian, 2003, 147). The portrayal of Shenzhen as a transitional, in-between place reinforces Hong's own inability to anchor her identity or get over her past traumatic experience.

Hong's final moments on the plane, just before leaving Shenzhen, reveal her feelings toward the anonymous, nameless city—marking a farewell to it in the novel. She never returned to Shenzhen and continued to refer to it only as "the town in the South." Her emotional departure reflects a personal failure to reconcile herself with the city, as she leaves marked by disillusionment and emotional stagnation rather than personal transformation.

> The moment the plane left the ground, I fucking burst into tears. I swore I would never come back to this town in the South ever again. This weird, plastic, bullshit Special Economic Zone, with all that pain and sadness, and the face of love, and the whole totally fucked-up world of heroin, and the late-1980s gold rush mentality, and all that pop music from Taiwan and Hong Kong. This place had all of the best and all of the worst. It had become my eternal nightmare. (Mian, 128).

4. Shanghai: A Decadent Home

As mentioned earlier, the modern city of Shanghai emerged on the site of a small fishing village and market town. It rose to global prominence in the 19th century due to its strategic port location and the growth of both domestic and foreign trade. As a contact point between East and West, Shanghai became a testing ground where various ideological and cultural ideas were welcomed, accommodated, and reimagined. Among these influences was a complex and diverse literary tradition that established Shanghai as, arguably, the literary capital of China.

The modern urban landscape—shaped by economic and social upheaval and a lifestyle dictated by capitalism—was here to stay. Shanghai's openness as a city has also mirrored its position as a fountainhead of formal experimentation. From the modernism of novelists like Shi Zhecun or poets like Dai Wangshu in the 1930s, to the new avant-garde of 80s writers like novelist Sun Ganlu or critic Wu Liang, the city's writers have always devoted themselves to the innovation of form. Literary experimentation, of course, goes hand-in-hand with groundbreaking subject matter, and the exploration of new and different possibilities for human existence (Dai & Jin, 2020).

In the fiction from Shanghai during the beginning of the twentieth century, the abstract (and superior) values of Western civilization are identical to the material culture of the city. "One emblematic sign of this cultural superiority - and the latent psychological threat it implies - is the modern woman, usually represented as the

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"westernized Chinese girl" who is independent and sexually and socially liberated." (Lee, 2025, 134). In *Love in a Fallen City*, Eileen Chang combines scenes of everyday life with urban experience to perceptively reflect the social realities of Shanghai and Hong Kong, capturing both historical transformation and nuanced insights into human nature (Wang, 2023, 17).

In the *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* by Wang Anyi, the foreign and exotic qualities of Shanghai are displaced by the endless and repetitive details of everyday life. The author's ambition to "rewrite" the literary topography of the Chinese metropolis is evident from the beginning; the first four chapters are devoted to creating a familiar, domestic ambience through detailed description of Shanghai's alleyways, its rooftop pigeons, "the numerous "boudoirs" inside the alleyway communities, and the gossip that fills the air before the zooming in on the heroine, Wang Qiyao". (Lee, 2025, 136)

In *Candy*, Shanghai's position as the native city of both Hong and the author is deeply rooted. It is portrayed with emotion, capturing the city in the 1990s while still holding on to fragments of its 1930s golden age. Mian Mian is fully aware of the emotions the image of Shanghai stirs in Chinese minds, using them to strengthen the narrative and mirror the protagonist's emotional state. Sometimes no further explanation is needed—just a list of a few club names is enough to conjure an atmosphere, whether vibrantly new and modern or steeped in nostalgia.

Hong returns to her native Shanghai heartbroken and struggling with drug addiction. After leaving a drug rehabilitation centre, she begins to rediscover the city, trying to find her place within it.

> Shanghai had completely transformed. It was no longer anything like the old Shanghai. It was becoming more beautiful and more hollow all the time…. I started to like Shanghai, with all those new names with foreign words mixed in. (Mian, 2003, 158)

Hong's relationship with Kiwi feels more like a dream or fantasy than a stable partnership. Though aware of his sexual fluidity, she genuinely enjoys his company—especially his fashion advice and makeup skills, which help shape her image in the dynamic landscape of modern Shanghai. In her eyes, they could become an iconic fashion couple. Together, they haunt the city's clubs, mingle with musicians, and immerse themselves in its vibrant energy. Yet their relationship is shaken when their old friend Apple reappears.

Mian Mian deliberately taps into Shanghai's legacy, evoking the charm and nostalgia of its past. She recalls the city's jazz scene, emblematic of the golden era: "Apple suggested that we go to the Cotton Club, where Cocoa was singing 1930s jazz." (Mian, 2003, 160)

Here, nostalgia becomes a way to explore the city's invisible transformations, including the arrival of new English words into Chinese:

> Even the moon is waxing nostalgic. And all the world is a poet. Tomorrow night there's going to be a moon-cake party. It's in an old 1930s house. Everyone uses the English word these days. Moon-cake *party*, five-chrysanthemum *party*, golden stem and jade leaf *party*. Shanghai is the mother of all "parties". (Mian, 167)

The novel is written in the first person, most often from Hong's perspective. As the story unfolds, the narrator shifts—sometimes Saining takes over. Earlier, in Shenzhen, even a prostitute narrates the addiction scenes. Shanghai, too, is sometimes shown through Saining's eyes. His view of the city, shaped by the nightlife important to a musician, reflects his own dark, melancholic mood:

> Every weekend is the same to me. The locations change but it's still the same bullshit. Shanghai nightlife is hopeless. But we go out on weekends anyway. Weekend nights are like a stage and we're the performers, only we've started to forget our lines. We wander down South Maoming Road, thinking, we'll go barhopping. Groove is gone, permanently shut down, and it's place there's a teahouse. YY's is empty, and with no one there, we don't want to be there either. We're hopelessly boring, ourselves. DD's has moved, and it's completely changed. DKD is still pretty good. But could a little place run by purists really survive in Shanghai? (Mian, 240)

Later, when he returns and tries to re-establish his relationship with Hong, the impossibility of intimacy between them shapes his perception of the city: "Shanghai at night is like a beautiful but frigid woman. My Shanghai is always grieving; a city without men." (Mian, 243) The city thus becomes a mirror for the protagonists' moods—a place filtered through their emotions. Though Shanghai's history is often invoked, it appears here as a subjective city: fascinating, yet cold and filled with hopelessness.

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Apple's death is also closely tied to the urban environment. Living in a cramped apartment with a tiny, unventilated bathroom, he suffocated while bathing during winter with the windows closed. The city's spatial constraints turn an ordinary domestic act into a fatal event. This episode crystallises the novel's sombre tone by revealing the dark side of urban modernity: material aspirations promise comfort and progress, yet instead produce confinement, vulnerability, and loss. Apple's death is neither heroic nor accidental but emerges from the logic of urban living itself, exposing how the pursuit of a "better life" within the city can paradoxically lead to physical and emotional suffocation.

In this scene, the narrator is Hong:

> Apple was the person who took me to the first café, when a cup of coffee cost five yuan in Shanghai. That sidewalk café was called Little Brocade River. He took me to so many streets and boulevards. He said that Shanghai's four seasons were so distinct and that this had always kept his senses sharp… He'd always wanted a comfortable bathtub; the one he had was his first. The bathroom was too small, but he insisted on putting a child's bathtub in there. The bathroom was really too small, and there was no ventilation. He didn't die because of fate; he died because of his standard of living. He died in cold and cloudy Shanghai winter. (Mian, 2003, 256)

Conclusion

Mian Mian presents an image of a young urban woman deeply connected to city life. The urban landscape becomes both a setting and a form of release. In comparing the novel's urban narratives, the role of Shenzhen is particularly significant—it is the city where the love story between the two protagonists unfolds, ending when Hong leaves. Although mentioned several times, Shenzhen remains largely anonymous: "Today, someone came from the South, someone who wanted me to pick out one of Saining's songs for inclusion on a CD." (Mian, 2003, 141) Unlike Shanghai, a city with a legacy, Shenzhen's lack of identity becomes its defining feature in *Candy*.

Although anonymous, nameless Shenzhen and charming, distinctive Shanghai may appear to have little in common—aside from being relatively new cities—there is one overlooked similarity: both are often perceived as Westernized and not deeply rooted in Chinese tradition. Some Chinese observers even regard these cities as lacking sufficient "Chineseness"—a perception that does not extend uniformly to all Chinese cities shaped by Western influence after the Opium Wars. For example, Qingdao, despite its colonial past, draws heavily on the ancient traditions of Shandong province, the birthplace of Confucius.

Shenzhen has long been seen as a gateway to the free and international Hong Kong—a view that has evolved since Hong Kong's return to the PRC in 1997. Similarly, Shanghai historically enjoyed a degree of freedom and independence and has been regarded as the most open-minded city in China. It has maintained a highly Westernized lifestyle and a liberal attitude toward the LGBTI community. However, this reputation has shifted somewhat in recent years, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, as Shanghai appears to have lost part of its administrative autonomy.

In *Candy*, unlike in other novels set in Shanghai, there is no sense of the old Shanghai community—no warm neighbourhood feeling like that in *Shanghai Baby* by Wei Hui, or the strong sisterly bonds described by Wang Anyi in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Mian Mian's Shanghai feels more like a Western city—cold, alienated, and above all, deeply subjective. The mood of the city shifts with the emotional state of the protagonists. From charming nostalgia and blossoming modernity, it transforms into a deeply depressing place, intensified by the death of Apple, who dies due to poor living conditions.

The confined living spaces for which Shanghai is known—hinted in *Candy* as a factor in Apple's unfortunate death—are also reflected in other works, such as Wang Anyi's short story *The Final Stop of This Train* (火车驶向终点, 1981), where an entire family—including a married son and his wife—lives in a single, tiny apartment. However, Mian Mian's most striking image is different: that of a modern Chinese urban woman, aware of her desires, including her sexuality. Although sexually explicit passages were censored or blurred in later editions, the novel still portrays a bold vision of the urban woman.

In *Candy*, urban identity reflects the fragility of its characters, especially Hong. The novel takes place in two cities—Shanghai and Shenzhen—that are portrayed as disconnected from traditional Chinese culture. These settings lack the typical narrative of Chinese society, creating a sense of detachment that mirrors the disillusionment of the 1990s, also present in *Shanghai Baby*. Unlike Wang Shuo's novels, which are deeply rooted in the urban lifestyle yet still engage with the establishment, *Candy* avoids any connection with official narratives.

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The characters escape into the world of big cities—places that, more than any others in China, feel detached from politics and the Party's ideological discourse. This detachment contrasts with Wang Anyi's *The Final Stop of This Train*, in which the main character returns to Shanghai after the Cultural Revolution, attempting to find his place yet feeling overwhelmed and alienated, with political narratives still strongly present. This difference reflects the distinct historical periods in which both works were written. Unlike literature of the 1980s, post-1970s writers engage far less with political events. Mian Mian's characters retreat into an imaginary world, into a Chinese version of consumerism that consumed the minds of many after 1989. Instead of seeking political freedom, they search for personal freedom—found in big-city life, sexual exploration, and drug use.

In *Candy*, urban women and their emotional needs are at the forefront. They strive to detach themselves from their mothers' world and to find new social roles. Hong is fragile, often losing control and struggling to regain it. The cities are the canvas on which her story is constructed, essential to its shape and meaning.

Through its portrayal of Hong's fragmented identity and its departure from conventional urban narratives, *Candy* not only redefines the image of Chinese urban women but also reveals how certain cities—perceived as culturally detached—become symbolic spaces of emotional and societal rupture. In this way, *Candy* invites readers to reconsider the role of urban identity in post-1989 Chinese literature. Unlike Wei Hui, who in *Shanghai Baby* occasionally references political events such as the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade—an incident that deeply stirred national emotions—*Candy* avoids political commentary. The only hint appears in a description of a crackdown on CDs, described as "surplus products sent by Western record companies as gifts to the children of our socialist country, but that customs had cut them, and they'd been smuggled in" (Mian, 2003, 152), an important source of foreign music and a window to the outside world. Mian Mian even labels an entire generation of music lovers reliant on such CDs as the "Hole-Punch generation" (Mian, 2003, 152).

Here, urban identity becomes another form of freedom—freedom from cultural stereotypes, from traditional gender roles that demand women satisfy others while neglecting their own desires. This theme, present in earlier works by Eileen Chang, also reflects the *genius loci* of Shanghai.

Future research could explore urban identities more deeply, making complex comparisons across literature by female authors—from Eileen Chang and Wang Anyi to Mian Mian and her contemporaries like Wei Hui—and extending to later works such as the dystopian *Folding Beijing* by Hao Jingfang. Another approach would be to focus solely on Shanghai, whose place in Chinese literature is strong enough to merit exclusive study, incorporating both male and female voices. In any case, the construction of urban identity in Chinese literature remains a field deserving of greater scholarly attention.

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