Western Modernity Interwoven with Chinese Traditions: Lives and Identities of an Emerging Cosmopolitan Society in Late Nineteenth Century Shanghai

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As one of the first Chinese cities opened to Western trade in mid 19th century, Shanghai soon became the preferred place of residence for foreign merchants and entrepreneurs in East Asia. Shanghai's economy thrived and the people made this development possible came from various provinces of China, from the principal nations of Europe, the United States, Japan, and other Asian countries already colonised by the West. The relative importance of these communities varied from one period to another, but the barriers that separated them - languages, customs, and interests - all contributed to the fragmentation of the local society. This paper examines how different practices came to be grafted onto traditional systems and how Shanghai provided many opportunities for intercultural contacts between groups of people from vastly different backgrounds. I shall demonstrate that a new cosmopolitan society, largely modeled upon the Western modernity but interwoven with traditions from various parts of China, was rapidly emerging in Shanghai in the late nineteenth century, together with a distinctive "Shanghai identity" that shaped both Chinese and foreigners.

Keywords: Shanghai, foreign concession, urban structure, Sino-Western exchange, national identity

Introduction

When the Treaty of Nanjing designated Shanghai one of the five Chinese ports to be opened up to Western trade in 1842, the destiny of the city was sealed. Among the five ports, Shanghai rapidly affirmed its preeminence because of its position at the mouth of the Yangzi River that served a huge surrounding basin right at the center of China.[1] Within a few decades, Shanghai became the preferred place of residence for the foreign entrepreneurs who, with the aid of Chinese merchants, set up their business there. Thanks to the privileges granted by the treaty and the autonomy that the concessions acquired, the foreign residents, together with the Chinese who now settled alongside them, found themselves protected from the troubles that beset the last imperial dynasty and the fraught birth of the Republic after the 1911 Revolution.

In the late nineteenth century, almost three-quarters of Shanghai's inhabitants were not natives of the town. They had come there from the Chinese provinces, Europe, the US, and Japan. The population was fragmented into communities that had virtually no communication with each other. Provincial dialects created as many barriers between the Chinese as national languages between the Europeans. Many would describe Shanghai at this time as a patchwork or a mosaic, for the different communities and their identities changed as the economic and political circumstances did.[2] In the absence of a strong and unified local government, authority in such a society of largely temporary residents resided principally with organisations that represented specific regional or professional interests, chambers of commerce, clubs, guilds, secret societies, and gangs, all of which led largely autonomous lives.

This paper examines how the urban structure and multifaceted cultural landscape in Shanghai came into being and how daily lives of various peoples in different parts of the city—the Chinese city and foreign concessions—were shaped by the unique nature of the cosmopolitan society. Different practices came to be grafted onto traditional systems and the new city provided many opportunities for intercultural contacts between groups of people from vastly different backgrounds. In the mean time, a Shanghai identity also began to emerge in the last years of the nineteenth century. On the side of the foreigners, the pioneers of a society established on the margins of the Western world gave way to long-term expatriates who welcomed a much-improved urban environment. On the Chinese side, there were detectable signs of a nascent patriotism that to a certain extent transcended them.

A Town with Two Faces: The Chinese City and Concessions

Prior to the nineteenth century, Shanghai was not just "a fishing village", as one long-standing myth would have it.[3] By the time of late eighteenth century, Shanghai boasted between 200,000 and 300,000 inhabitants, whose living and commercial quarters extended beyond the city wall to the Huangpu River. The inhabited area was covered with a maze of narrow streets, the most important of which, 3 to 4 metres wide, were paved with bricks

and lined by stalls. The network of streets interlaced with that of the canals, which often turned to beds of mud and rubbish periodically flushed out by floods. There was no sign of any town planning reflecting a political will or any ritual or ideologically preoccupations, as suggested by the regular grid pattern of many cities in northern China.[4]

The Nanjing Treaty signed in 1842 granted the right of residence of foreigners in Shanghai but did not make it clear where they should establish themselves.[5] The circuit intendant (*daotai*) of Shanghai, Gong Mujiu (1788-1848), drew up the Land Regulations in 1845, which granted the British the right to install themselves in a zone measuring 832 *mu* (ca. 56 hectares), later extended to 2,820 *mu* (ca. 56 hectares) in 1848.[6] The zone was located to the north of the walled town along the bank of the Huangpu. To the north and the south, the Suzhou River and the Yangjingbang delimited the area. To the west, the Zhoujingbang (also know as the Defence Creek) stood as the boundary.[7] In fact, the concessions were the result of local agreements that, in the first instance, specified procedures for transferring the foreigners' land rights. Provided that an annual rent was paid to the Chinese proprietors, the foreigners could obtain perpetual rights. Thus in the course of time, those ad hoc arrangements served as the basis upon which to develop veritable colonial enclaves.

The Land Regulations explicitly expressed that no Chinese could claim ownership of land or buildings in the settlement, but they did not specify what if the buyers were Westerner but not British. The ambiguity was discovered by the French and the Americans and it soon resulted in the creation of new concessions. On April 6, 1849, a proclamation established the boundaries of the French concession: in the south it reached to the wall of the old town, in the east to the Huangpu banks, in the north the Yangjingbang, and in the west to roughly as far as the British concession. The Americans protested the creation of the French concession and they settled in large numbers in the Hongkou quarter north of the Suzhou River, which became the de facto American concession. In 1863, the American concession finally gained official recognition and a few months later it merged with the British counterpart to form the International Settlement.[8]
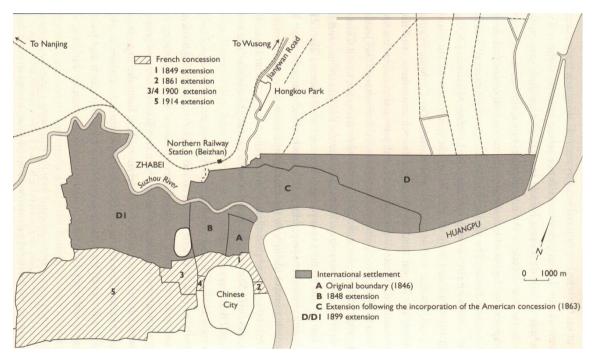

Figure 1: The foreign concession in Shanghai and their further extensions. From: Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2009), 90.

The quadrangular network of streets in the new quarters did not suggest any deliberate aspirations to colonial grandeur. It followed the pattern of existing waterways and paths and "reflected the preoccupations of the merchants and aimed to answer their needs."[9] The new quarters developed at an uneven speed, as the French and American concessions lacked far behind in infrastructure construction in the years following the opening up of the port, this land soon possessed a new looking different to the old Chinese town. The streets running from west to the east and south to north presented a stark contrast to the maze of tiny alleys in the walled town. The vast European-style residences, set in their flower-filled gardens, were erected nit far away from the cramped buildings in the old town.
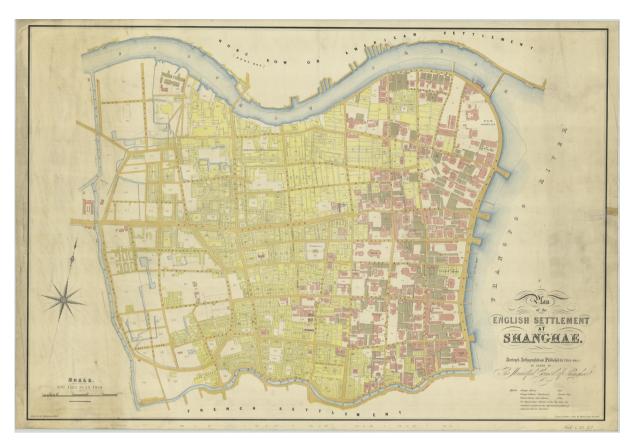
Figure 2: Street plan of the British Concession (marked as "English Settlement"), published in 1864-1866. Courtesy of the British Library [collection id: C019/6103]. Available at: http://www.sciencephoto.com/media/570208/view/english-settlement-at-shanghai [19 March, 2018]

Figure 3: Street plan of the French Concession, published in 1882. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France [collection id: 138]. Available at: http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b530211173 [March 21, 2018]

Emergence of a Multicultural Community

Despite the exclusive right of foreigners to reside in the concessions, the misfortunes of the 1850s and 1860s, in particular the secret society of Small Sword (*Xiaodaohui*) and the Taiping uprising, which brought to Shanghai an unremitting series of violent disorders, looting, and repression.[10] The turbulence of these days encouraged many Chinese to take refuge in the foreign concessions and soon the massive wave of immigration changed the life of foreign residents. Mansions and gardens were demolished and the concessions now mushroomed with "lane communities" (*lilong*) intended for Chinese tenants: terraced houses of one or two stories, arranged in parallel rows, with continuous built-up facade giving onto the street.[11] Despite the influx of Chinese residents, the concessions remained outside the imperial jurisdiction. The British, French, and American consuls shouldered the task of inventing institutions to carter to the needs of the new Sino-foreign community. From 1854 to 1864, the concessions witnessed the creation of the Shanghai Municipal Council, which later became the official governing body of all concessions, the establishment of a General Inspectorate of Maritime Customs, the merge of the American concession with the British, and the Mixed Court that adjudicated cases involving Chinese residents. A multicultural community emerged.[12]

Within this fragmented society, the major division that separated Chinese and Westerners remained. Westerners were now more numerous: about 15,000 in 1910, compared to only 250 in 1855, but they represented barely 1% of the 1.3 million inhabitants who now made up Shanghai. But their presence acted as a catalyst upon a number of social and institutional changes that would make Shanghai the first modern Chinese city. The foreign community, however, was divided by deep national, professional, and religious rifts. Although the relative importance of the British had declined, in 1910 they still made up the largest group (4,500) and also the most influential as its members still had the de facto control over the municipal institutions. Around the British establishments was an Indian community of about 1,300 individuals, most of who were employed as policemen together with some merchants from the region of Bombay.[13] The Japanese, who began to flock in around 1900, numbered about 3,400 and they lived in isolation in the Hongkou quarter to the north of the international settlement. Next to the British, the American group was almost the same size as the French. Germans were slightly fewer, and the Russians, even fewer. The 1,500 Portuguese, mostly from Macao, formed a group apart.[14] Each of these groups stressed its own cultural and religious individuality, however, the British, who were at the top of the tree and put their mark upon social relations both within the international community and with the neighboring Chinese society, set the tone. The British influence was manifest also in the daily activities, the organisation of the living environment, the development of leisure activities and sport, and the use of English as the lingua franca in the foreign communities.

Figure 4: General view of Bund, ca. 1870. Courtesy of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles [object no.: 84.XO.1356.17]. Available at: http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/208307/unknown-maker-general-view-of-bund-shanghai-about-1870/ [20 March, 2018]

The professional hierarchy reflected the national one. The most highly respected notables were the merchants and the bankers, many of them were either English or Scottish. These British businessmen had arrived as youths in Shanghai and worked as griffins before becoming bosses. The most important of them represents companies based in London or New York.[15] Diplomatic staff represented a different circle of influence. Each of the fifteen or so great powers covered by the treaty system maintained a consulate-general or a representative office in Shanghai. In the last years of the empire, three consulates-general were remarkable for their competence and influence: those of Britain, France, and Russia. The small circle of professional men sometimes intersected with that of local foreign officials and, more often, with that of the missionaries. All Catholic orders and every Protestant denomination were represented in Shanghai, which was the principal center for missionaries in China. They ran many educational institutions, hospitals, printing works, and publishing houses that produced not only bibles but also translations of Western scientific works. The everyday functioning of the foreign community also depended on the presence of other Westerners, ones who did not belong to the high society of the concessions. For instance, many Portuguese were entrusted with accounting and copying work in foreign companies. Finally, the foreign community could also count on the services of several dozen prostitutes of Western origin.[16]

Cosmopolitan Life in the New Society

Since the mid-nineteenth century, living conditions in the foreign concessions had greatly improved. By the end of the century, the quality of the infrastructure of Shanghai equaled those of large European and American cities. The Bund was no longer a stinking towpath bordering the river but a well-constructed wharf, which now adorned banks, trading houses, and official buildings. Also cars and telephones were not rare. The British gathered in the Shanghai Club on the Bund, while the French, the German, the Irish all had their own preferred clubs.[17] The British were keen on horse racing, so that a 30-hectare racecourse was built in 1861, where now is the People's Square. Theaters and balls were always celebrated by Western inhabitants.[18] Those interested in literary and historical research organised themselves around the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society that was set up in Shanghai in 1858.

Figure 5: The Shanghai Club in 1872. Courtesy of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles [object no.: 84.XA.614.8]. Available at: http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/141320/john-thomson-the-club-shanghai-scottish-1862-1872/ [22 March, 2018].

However, it remains a question as could it be said that the various national groups thrown together in the concessions made up a real community? For a long time, the standoffishness of the French and the national and religious particularities of other groups blocked the emergence of a wider sense of community membership and the development of a spirit of local citizenship. The Shanghai of the foreigners was from the start defined by its opposition to its Chinese environment, and this conferred upon it a negative identity. On Nov. 17 and 18, 1893, the International Settlement celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the port. On the Bund, a streamer proclaimed "in what region of the world is Shanghai not known?"[19] However, the collective memory often functioned in a somewhat patchy way. Each national group celebrated the history of Shanghai by

commemorating the part that its most distinguished nationals had played. Given the large number and the dominant position of the British, foreign Shanghai was essentially British in the general collective memory. In such circumstances, it was hard for the foreign residents of Shanghai to entertain the notion of a shared identity. The various communities continued to gear their lives to the rhythms of their respective mother countries. The French celebrated July 14; the Americans July 4. The British got together to celebrate Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897 and King Edward VII's coronation in 1901; the Germans celebrated the visit of Prince Henry of Prussia in 1898.[20]

Closeness and complicity among the foreigners in Shanghai were forged elsewhere, in a shared sense of belonging to a pioneer community and coping with difficulties much different from in their mother countries; in the shared pleasure of freely flowing alcohol, banquets, and grand receptions. They were not ideologists, but their attachment to Shanghai and identification with it grew ever stronger as they rose to the challenges of difficult environment and created conditions for a privileged life.

The Chinese society alongside the foreign communities, on the other hand, showed another image. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese population in Shanghai grew from 700,000 in 1865 to 1.3 million on 1910.[21] The merchants from the neighboring Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces succeeded their forerunners from Guangdong and Fujian. Landowners and scholars from Suzhou and Wuxi, bankers from Ningbo, and peasant laborers from northern Jiangsu moved into Shanghai. Most of these newcomers settled in the concessions or on their peripheries. People with the same provincial origin liked to cluster together in particular quarters and streets. In the international settlement, natives of Jiangsu made up the largest group (180,000), followed by those of Zhejiang (170,000).[22] Each group was distinguished from the local population and other immigrant groups by its own dialect, its food, its rituals, and, in many cases, by its professional activities. Except for elite literate groups, very little communication took place between residents from different backgrounds. They spoke mainly, in many cases only, with their fellow countrymen from the same province or even the same district. Restaurants were classified not in terms of quality or price but according to their regional character. Regional solidarities were constructed around the native-place associations (*huiguan*). These *huiguan* protected the interests of their community, opened schools, and helped their members to find work or obtain capital.[23]

"Shanghai Identity": Combining Chinese and Western

While these multiple local cultures constituted a formidable obstacle to the formation of a Shanghai identity, a new identity was indeed emerging. At the end of the Taiping turbulence in the early 1860s, many landowners, distinguished scholars, retired officials, and powerful clan leaders arrived in Shanghai for shelter. The arrival of these elite groups, which Western historians of China often label as the gentry, tempered the dominance of the merchants, because they brought with them the prestige of their academic titles and connections, their experience as local managers, and their Confucian value. The merchants and the gentry soon found a measure of agreement, for they all indented to make the most of the economic conditions and to assume unprecedented social and political responsibilities.[24] Many wealthy merchants who were more exposed to contacts with the foreigners, adopted a partially Westernised lifestyle. Their horizons widened beyond China itself to encompass the outside world. Although they continued to respect Confucian precepts, they rejected some long-standing customs, such as not schooling girls and binding feet. Their culture was hybrid, as were their wardrobes, where long silk robes hang beside European-style suits.

The prestige of wealth now tended to eclipse that of education and official titles, and the pursuit of profit became more important than the practice of virtue. Major entrepreneurs gave up the idea of transforming their sons into scholars; instead, they had them educated in missionary schools or abroad to turn them into modern businessmen. Many scholars, on the other hand, combined their official tasks with entrepreneurial activities and some even abandoned public careers to devote themselves to business. The most famous case was that of Zhang Jian (1853-1926), the first in the civil service examination in 1894 who became the founder of one of the major textile factories in Shanghai.[25] According to the Confucian orthodoxy, scholars stood at the top of the social hierarchy and merchants at the bottom, but the two groups gradually merged together and formed a class of "gentry-merchants" (*shenshang*).[26] Such an integration of elite groups was not a new phenomenon, but in Shanghai this integration came about not so much on the basis of the Confucian values but on the values that merchants recognised, namely, pragmatism and modernism.

Concluding Remarks

In Shanghai, the meeting of Chinese civilisation and Western modernity took a pragmatic form. The local society's reception of foreign novelties and the foreigners' adaption to their new place of work and living progressed relatively smoothly. The adaptability and flexibility of these men injected an extraordinary dynamism

into Shanghai society. That dynamism influenced the aspirations of Chinese both inside and beyond the concessions. The existence of enclaves that eluded imperial authority offered Chinese residents the possibility of being Chinese in a new different way. It broke the monopoly over power and thought upon which Confucian orthodoxy was based and established the theoretical possibility of a dialogue between civilisations. But in reality, the communities in Shanghai were rather fragmented, in particular that of the foreigners and the Chinese. The arrogance of the foreigners and the privileges they enjoyed gave rise to the emergence of a modern Chinese nationalism that aimed to take up the Western challenge on its own terms: it aspired to economic modernisation, material prosperity, and social progress. Out of these twofold aspirations, at once modernising and nationalistic, came the initially reformist, then revolutionary movement that would eventually pull down the imperial regime in 1911.

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Disclosure Statement

Notes on contributor

Hang Lin is currently an associate professor at Hangzhou Normal University, China. He has received his MA and PhD in Chinese history from University of Wuerzburg, Germany, and he has completed a post-doc project on cultural expression and urban society in early modern China at University of Hamburg, Germany. His research interests focus on urban history of East Asia, socio-cultural transformations of East Asian cities, and ethnicity and ethnographic representation in urban contexts.

Endnotes

1 On Shanghai's strategic location and geographic advantages as a treaty port, see Robert Nield, *China's Foreign Places: The Foreign Presence in China in the Treaty Port Era, 1840-1943* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), 97, 174.

2 See, in particular, Frederic Wakeman, Jr. and Wen-hsin Yeh, eds., *Shanghai Sojourners* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992), 5.

3 Linda C. Johnson, *Shanghai: From Market Town to Treaty Port, 1074-1858* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 8-10.

4 The most famous examples are probably Chang'an of the Tang dynasty and Beijing of the Ming and Qing dynasties. For a study of the city structure of Chang'an, see Chye Kiang Heng, *Cities of Aristocrats and Bureaucrats: The Development of Medieval Chinese Cityscapes* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999). On Beijing, see Victor F. S. Sit, *Beijing: The Nature and Planning of a Chinese Capital City* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995); 1999. Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, *Chinese Imperial City Planning* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).

5 For detailed articles of the treaty, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), 158-160.

6 On Gong Mujiu and his tenure in Shanghai, see Yuansheng Liang, *The Shanghai Taotai: Linkage Man in a Changing Society, 1843-90* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 1990), 46-49.

7 Ernest O. Heuser, *Shanghai: City for Sale* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1940), 10.

8 F.L. Hawks Pott, *A Short History of Shanghai: Being an Account of the Growth and Development of the International Settlement* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1928), 63.

9 Marie-Claire Bergère, transl. Janet Lloyd, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2009), 35.

10 In 1853, the Xiaodaohui occupied the Chinese town, forcing the circuit intendant to flee, see Cooke, *Shanghai*, 267-291; Takeshi Hamashita, "Tribute and Treaties: East Asian Treaty Ports Networks in the Era of Negotiation, 1834-1894," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2002): 59–87. On Shanghai's situation during the era of the Taiping rebellion, see Immanuel C.Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 145-146.

11 Jeffery Wassertrom, *Shanghai: A History in Fragments* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 10-12.

12 Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 179.

[13] Claude Markovits, "Indian Communities in China, ca. 1842-1949," in *New Frontiers: Imperialism's New Communities in East Asia, 1842-1953*, edited by Robert Bickers and Christian Henriot (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 55-74.

[14] On the presence of the German in Shanghai, see Chiara Betta, "Marginal Westerners in Shanghai: The Baghdadi Community, 1845-1931," in *New Frontiers*, 38-54.

[15] Albert Feuerwerker, *The Foreign Establishment in China in the Early Twentieth Century*. Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies 29 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1976), 17-18.

[16] Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 18-22.

[17] On the various clubs, see C.E. Darwent, *Shanghai: A Handbook for Travellers and Residents* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1920), 7, 80; Guy Brossolet, *Les Français de Shanghai, 1849-1949* (New York: Vantage Press, 1967), 245-248.

[18] As early as the 1870s, the Caledonian Ball, organised by the Saint Andrew's Society, was one key events of the social season. The Amateur Dramatic Club, created in 1867 by some English residents, regularly put on theatre shows. On these issues, see Charles M. Dyce, *Personal Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Residence in the Model Settlement: Shanghai, 1870-1900* (Shanghai: Chapman and Hall, 1906), 200-221; Darwent, *Shanghai*, 196.

[19] Cited in Bergère, *Shanghai*, 97.

[20] Ling Pan, *Shanghai: A Century of Changes in Photographs 1843-1949* (Hong Kong: Haigeng Publishing, 1993), 28-29, 31.

[21] Yiren Zou, *Jiu Shanghai renkou bianqian de yanjiu* [A Study on the Demographic Development in Old Shanghai] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1980), 90.

[22] James C. Sanford, "Chinese Commercial Organiztion and Behaviour in Shanghai of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century," PhD dissertation (Harvard University, 1976), 183.

[23] For a detailed study of *huiguan* in Shanghai, see Bryna Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[24] Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 97.

[25] On Zhang's life and his modernist path in developing industry, see Kathy Le Mons Walker, *Chinese Modernity and the Peasant Path: Semicolonialism in the Northern Yangzi Delta* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 101-129.

[26] See Zhongping Chen, *Modern China's Network Revolution: Chambers of Commerce and Sociopolitical Change in the Early Twentieth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011)**,** 245-248.

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