This collection offers a global perspective on the changing character of cities and the increasing importance that consumer culture plays in defining their symbolic economies. Increasingly, forms of spectacle have come to shape how cities are imagined and to influence their character and the practices through which we know them—from advertising and the selling of real estate, to youth cultural consumption practices and forms of entrepreneurship, to the regeneration of urban areas under the guise of the heritage industry and the development of a WiFi landscape. Using examples of cities such as New York, Sydney, Atlantic City, Barcelona, Rio de Janeiro, Douala, Liverpool, San Juan, Berlin, and Harbin, this book illustrates how image and practice have become entangled in the performance of the symbolic economy. It also argues not just that it is how the urban present is being shaped in this way that is significant to the development of cities but also that a prominent feature of their development has been the spectacular imagining of the past as heritage and through regeneration. Yet the ghosts that this conjures up in practice offer us a possible form of political unsettlement and alternative ways of viewing cities that are only just beginning to be explored.

Through this important collection by some of the leading analysts of consumption, cities, and space, Consuming the Entrepreneurial City offers a cutting-edge analysis of the ways in which cities are developing and the implications this has for their future. It is essential reading for students of Urban Studies, Geography, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Heritage Studies, and Anthropology.

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CHAPTER 11

“The Atmosphere of a Foreign Country”

Harbin’s Architectural Inheritance

YUKIKO KOGA

At the official ceremony on September 2, 1997 to celebrate the restoration of St. Sophia Cathedral, an ornate Byzantine-style cathedral completed by the Russians in 1932, Mayor Wang Guangdao underlined the cultural and economic benefits expected from the project: “The restoration of St. Sophia Cathedral inspired the people in Harbin, raised the level of our culture, let the whole of China and foreign friends know Harbin, and opened a way for faster economic development” (Haerbinshi jianzhu weiyuanhui, 1997: 40). The restoration of St. Sophia was the culmination of the Harbin municipal government’s attempt to turn the city’s colonial-era structures into tourist attractions by restoring and granting them landmark status. These restored structures are said to signify civilization (wenming) and culture (wenhua), words used repeatedly by local officials, whose policy revolved around the discourse of wenming (civilization). Billboards in the streets of Harbin proudly state: “We build architectural civilization—Harbin Municipal Government Urban Planning Bureau.” Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang Province in Northeast China, is, like many other northeastern cities in the rustbelt, struggling with a high unemployment rate and the resulting social unrest, and trying to reposition itself in the global economy. “Now, the property/capital (zichan) of St. Sophia Cathedral belongs to Harbin,” proudly declared the mayor in his speech (Haerbinshi jianzhu weiyuanhui, 1997: 40). As if to fully realize the dual meaning of the Chinese term zichan, which refers to property and capital, the wenming discourse allows the city
government to turn its early twentieth-century architectural inheritance into capital.

Observing reform-era China of the 1990s, in which the discourse of wenning replaced that of class struggle, Ann Anagnost shows how the wenning discourse allows the party-state to become a "pedagogical state" and exert control over the newly emerging market (Anagnost, 1997). Anagnost lays out three meanings contained in the term wenning: modernization (xundaihua), Westernization (xianghua), and civilization (wenning), which refers to the glorious past that China once possessed as one of the oldest civilizations in the world (Anagnost, 1997: 75). The term wenning’s original usage was the last of these (with the character wen referring to written tradition, culture, or refinement, and the ming character referring to brightness, clarity, or openness) but came to mean modernization and Westernization in the late nineteenth century (Anagnost, 1997: 80–85). In reform-era China, wenning has resurfaced as an organizing principle, a semiotic fulcrum for leveraging the past, at the same time as it represents "a discourse of lack, referring to the failure of the Chinese people to embody international standards of modernity, civility, and discipline" (Anagnost, 1997: 76). The discourse of wenning provides legitimacy for the party-state to be a pedagogical state, preparing the “backward” (loushou), “uncultured” (meiyou wenhua) peasant population for the global market (Anagnost, 1997: 75–97).

In a speech made at a fund-raising meeting on June 13, 1997, Yue Yuquan, the deputy mayor of Harbin and the director of the St. Sophia Cathedral restoration project, emphasized that the purpose of the project was to raise the level of civilization in Harbin:

Building a civilized city is a centuries-long process, and is a necessary direction to take if Harbin is to flourish. Building a civilized city requires a combination of material and spiritual civilization, both of which will mutually influence each other to raise their levels of achievement. The restoration of St. Sophia Cathedral . . . will increase the civicizational awareness and public ethics among the citizens, and turn this area into a showcase of Harbin’s efforts to build a civilized city. (Haerbinshi jianzhu weiyuanhui, 1997: 50–51)

This sort of deployment of the wenning discourse, as Anagnost points out, conveys to its audience that the burst of productive energies during the reform era “cannot be allowed to signify the economy as a zone of autonomous action but must be harnessed by the party for its self-representation” (Anagnost, 1997: 95).

As China’s commitment to the global economy deepens, however, we see that the story does not end here. A close look at the case of Harbin demonstrates how the wenning discourse and what Anagnost calls “civilizing practices” by the party-state have produced unexpected excess. This chapter explores this excess in the form of a politics of inheritance as the government seeks to turn its architectural inheritance into cultural and market capital. By tracing moments of tension in historical interpretations, we see how the recent preservation policy set in motion a complicated play between official attempts to control the city’s legacy and the dynamics of secrets and their betrayal contained in the very process of inheritance that undermines the party-state.

As Jacques Derrida points out, inheritance is more than a simple transfer of capital from one generation to another; secrets inherent in inheritance open up a possibility of betrayal. What one inherits is opaque, with layers of histories written on it, yet one has no choice but to inherit (Derrida, 1994). Derrida alludes to a threefold usage of the term betrayal which illuminates the logic of inheritance. One usage is the conventional meaning of betrayal as an act of treason and disloyalty. The second refers to the act of revealing, disclosing, showing or exhibiting. The third refers to the act of disclosing or revealing what should be kept secret. Owing to the multiplicity of the past that inheritance embodies, displaying inheritance could result in an act of disloyalty and denunciation by revealing what is supposed to be unseen. What the case of historical preservation in Harbin illustrates is the tension brought forth by the play of these three workings of betrayal contained within its architectural inheritance. Capitalizing on inheritance by exposing what has long been invisible through restoration is accompanied by an unexpected excess that disturbs long-held narratives of the past.

Two buildings stand as ciphers for the city’s contentious past and symbols of its consumer-oriented present: the physically restored St. Sophia Cathedral and the publicly rehabilitated St. Nicholas Church, a beloved central Russian Orthodox church destroyed in 1966 during the Cultural Revolution. The so-called historians’ debate around Harbin’s historical origin sets the stage here for a discussion of the restoration of St. Sophia and the flourishing nostalgia industry of “Old Harbin” (lao Haerbin), and the resurrection of St. Nicholas Church and repressed memories of the Cultural Revolution. The case of Harbin demonstrates a transformation that is at once distinctive and similar to the experience of other Chinese cities as they reinvent their pasts to reposition themselves in the global economy.2

The production of a marketable past has illuminated what can be called postcolonialism as China’s unconscious. Traveling in Northeast China never fails to make one aware of its colonial history. Many cities have museums or historical sites that illustrate the “era of colonialism” (zhimin zhu yi shidai). In large cities, major historical sites are turned into historical
museums. Their exhibitions are quite elaborate, and are frequented by students on school excursions, as they are designated as “patriotic education bases” (jiao yu jidi). They portray the Japanese atrocities committed during the war with brutal graphics, followed by the illustration of the Chinese Communist Party’s brave anticolonial struggle and eventual victory. It is, therefore, rather perplexing to observe how postcolonial analyses play a relatively marginal role in examining contemporary China.

Through her careful reading of the major texts of postwar China studies in the United States, Tani Barlow (1993) shows the curious absence of colonialism in the literature. She argues that Cold War discourse erased colonialism in English-language China studies and urges bringing postcolonial critiques into the study of China (Barlow, 1993: 251). Since her article was published in 1993, the field has observed an increased interest in the study of China in relation to colonialism. While there is now much scholarly work on colonialism and China, there is far less that uses postcolonialism as an analytical device for examining contemporary China. When postcolonial frameworks are used, they tend to emphasize the conceptual and gloss over the material legacies of colonialism. Contemporary analyses of China’s postcoloniality are often linked to China’s redefined pursuit of modernity within a global economy and are framed as an expression of deferred postcolonial desires.

Building upon these works, the case examined here further complicates the picture by illustrating how China’s postcoloniality plays out in both materiality and psychology and how the intersection of these elements produces effects beyond state control. Within this dynamic, the interpretation and the meaning attached to “colonialism” itself changes.

The tentative status of postcoloniality in China studies in the US has its counterpart in China. Indeed, the absence of a postcolonial discourse in contemporary Chinese scholarship is even more surprising, given the fact that the Chinese narration of the nation originates in its anticolonial and anti-imperial struggles. This absence does not derive from the erasure of colonialism that Barlow finds in her examination of the US scholarship. Colonialism is very much present in the Chinese narration of its own history of “the era of colonialism” (zhimin zhuyi shiqi), and anticolonialist rhetoric is omnipresent in contemporary China in school textbooks, films, and historical relics. Yet the narration of China’s history after the victory over Japan simultaneously reveals and disguises the burdens of its colonial past by displacing them onto the present. The discourse of the New China marks 1949, the birth year of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), as its zero hour, marking a clear discontinuity with the past.

In this discourse, colonialism appears as one of China’s cultural relics, frozen in time in a demarcated space of historical sites, and its situations stay closely guarded by the state (Watson, 1994; Clausen and Thøgersen, 1995: 199–217).

As a result, contemporary China finds both omnipresent colonial traces and their erasure. In the case of Harbin, the narrations of the city’s history after 1949 simultaneously reveal and disguise colonialism, displaying a warped erasure of its postcoloniality. What the restoration project in Harbin sets in motion is a postcolonial awareness, a process which ultimately questions the legitimacy of the party-state. This chapter is a story of resilient yet often-unarticulated postcolonial conditions in China which have resurfaced in new guises as a result of recent urban reconfigurations in the midst of China’s mad rush to the market.

“The Atmosphere of a Foreign Country”:
Harbin’s Colonial Inheritance

Following the opening ceremony and media coverage of St. Sophia Cathedral and the Harbin Architecture Art Centre in 1997, the municipal government started planning for a gala celebration of Harbin’s centenary the following year with numerous ceremonies, publications, and sales of commemorative gold plates. But the government canceled all the events at the last minute under pressure from a gathering chorus opposing a “colonialist historical perspective” (zhimin zhuyi lishiguan). This awkward incident for the city government emerged from the so-called historians’ debate, really a series of linked debates that started in 1992 among local intellectuals in anticipation of the centenary celebration in 1998.

The debate concerns two issues which revolve around the disputed origin of the city: (1) the birth year of the city and (2) the condition of Harbin before the arrival of the Russians in 1898. The initial debate was carried in the major local daily newspaper Xinwanbao [New Evening News], which published 14 essays from April to June 1992 under the series title “City Origin Debate,” written mostly by academics at universities of the provincial or city academy of social sciences. The essays illuminate the core tension, which continues today.

Wang Yulang, one of the most vocal critics of the colonialist historical perspective, traces the origin of Harbin to the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234 AD) (Wang Yulang, 1992a; 1992b). He rejects Harbin’s colonial origin by claiming the city’s civilization predated the Russian arrival. Against this view, Wang Dexin cautiously differentiates the archeological origin of the city (chengshi jiuyuan) from the city’s origin (chengshi jiuyuan), and claims the primacy of the latter, concluding that “there is no doubt that the construction of the [Russian-built] Chinese Eastern Railway is considered the historical incident that marks the origin of the city” (Wang Dexin, 1992a). In a subsequent essay published three days later, however, he cautiously preempts certain criticism by stating: “Any one of the historical moments
that embody invasion and colonialism, such as signing for the construction of the railroad, cannot be the origin of the city, since that is not what proud Chinese would be willing to accept" (Wang Dexin, 1992b). To avoid any date that resonates with imperialism, he diplomatically suggests January 1, 1900 as the birthday of Harbin.

Dogged by critiques of a "colonial historical view" the opponents reached a tentative consensus in December 1994 and agreed to set the origin of Harbin in 1898, when the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway began (Feng, 1994; Lu, 1994; Yu, 1994). Yet the sensitive question of colonial inheritance again found forceful voices.8 Sociologist Shang Zhifa strongly objected to recognizing 1898 as the origin of the city by asking: "Should all the colonial cities in the world that were constructed after colonial invasions commemorate the moment of oppression?" (Yuan, 1996). In private conversation, a prominent local intellectual used the example of Columbus to point out that it would be inappropriate to mark the date of Columbus' discovery of America as the origin of America. He asked, "then what do the Maya think of such an historical interpretation?" He continued to explain: "It is not true that the arrival of the Russian ship started Harbin. The city was built by the Chinese, who laid bricks one by one . . . To think that the city was born when the Russians arrived is a coloniser perspective, and that is why I cannot agree with this view."

According to some of the debate participants, opponents of the 1898 consensus brought the issue to the local Security Bureau while the preparation for the citywide centenary celebration was under way. The Bureau took the issue to the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Beijing, and a high level directive came back to Harbin to cancel the celebration. Despite the appearance of open debate in the media, the government decision to cancel the centenary commemoration immediately resulted in self-censorship. The local newspapers refused to publish articles advocating 1898 as the date of the city's origin and some writers even faced the threat of arrest by the Security Bureau. Yet the debate continued and the fall of 2003 witnessed another wave of heated discussion. In the midst of this renewed debate, one of the most vocal advocates of 1898 disappeared without a trace, and his main opponent was suddenly transferred to a university in another city. People were reluctant to talk about this mysterious incident, and many indicated to me that I had better not stick my nose into this matter. Repeated eruptions of the historians' debate over the past decade signal the volatile nature of coming to terms with the city's colonial inheritance.

The ambiguous place of colonialism in Harbin's history is highlighted by a cityscape that maintains unambiguous traces of foreign forces. Once called the "Paris of the East" in the first half of the twentieth century, Harbin cityscape still appears more European than Chinese with its elegant art nouveau architecture and numerous other Western-style colonial structures (Figure 11.1). Many locals proudly and fondly describe the urban space of Harbin as exotic (yiguo qingdiao—the atmosphere of a foreign country). Likewise, local travel guidebooks highlight Harbin's exotic cityscape with glossy photographs of Western architecture. Postcards of these structures abound, and colonial-era structures dominate the visual composition of the city. In addition to its prominent art nouveau buildings, the city space presents itself as a visual bricolage of Renaissance, Baroque, Classical Revival, Romanesque, Judaic, Byzantine, Russian, "Chinese Baroque," Eclectic, and Modern styles from the period, as well as sober socialist style buildings from the 1970s and 1980s, 1990s mirrored glass and steel monoliths which embody the "modern" ideology of the Beijing government, and the more recent, so-called "European-style" (oufeng) buildings that echo motifs of colonial buildings.

With the historical preservation policy that started in 1996, the Harbin municipal government has turned once purposefully neglected and dust-covered symbols of colonialism into part of Harbin's historical heritage rather than demolish them.19 The interest in tourism is not merely ancillary to the economy. This freezing northern city in China's declining rustbelt
suffers from high unemployment owing to the privatization of state-run heavy industries, and cash revenue from tourism and related employment opportunities is a matter of survival. Although media coverage of social unrest remains prohibited by the authorities, numerous protests by unemployed workers are part of the everyday scene. It is in this context that the preservation policy has been eagerly promoted by the government as a way of transforming its colonial inheritance into profit-generating touristic capital.

The most concrete result of the conversion of the colonial past into a tourist attraction is the influx of visitors from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Russia. The famous January ice festival and European atmosphere beckons Chinese from the wealthy south, while Japanese tourists purchase tour packages to this “former Manchurian” city and “discover” a modern city that is simultaneously a historical artifact. The once vibrant societies of White Russians and Russian Jews in the first half of the twentieth century are now replaced by poor Russians from Siberia, hawking military binoculars and army watches in street markets to buy their daily meal in this city of plentiful commodities, while well-to-do Russian tourists come from all over to admire the Russian-style architecture of the previous fin de siècle. The city of Harbin acknowledges the tourists’ gaze, and seeks to recreate cosmopolitanism through large projects and small gestures, such as bilingual (Chinese and English) plaques on protected colonial architecture that describe the brief history of each building in positive terms.

Yet, the trace of the West so undeniably inscribed in Harbin’s urban space is notably absent from official historical narratives of the city under Mao (Gao et al., 1998). It is as if the West suddenly disappeared from sight after the Liberation in 1949 until the historical preservation policy in the 1990s unearthed what had long been invisible to the locals. This discursive disappearance of colonial traces was part of the government’s long-standing attempt to construct a history of the Chinese vis-à-vis “foreigners,” and went hand in hand with the “disappearance” of ethnic groups. Through this process of fixing Harbin within the master-narrative of Maoist nation-state building, the local government avoided highlighting Harbin’s “exotic atmosphere” (yiguo qingdiao). The ideology that produced such invisibility is now being challenged both by internal and external pressures.

Historical preservation projects oriented toward tourism are often criticized for reproducing the colonial gaze. Concerning the visual consumption of history in Hong Kong, Ackbar Abbas argues that the preservation of colonial architecture reduces historical memory to kitsch “by aestheticizing them out of existence” (Abbas, 1997: 65–69). As a result, historical sight substitutes for the disappearance of historical site. Such a critique speaks to the situation in Harbin, where the preservation project celebrates the element of cosmopolitanism that accompanied colonialism, and effaces the suffering of imperial aggression. Although this critique is apposite, spatial politics in Harbin presents a more complex dynamic beneath the façade of aestheticized colonial space.

The Restoration of St. Sophia Cathedral and Old Harbin Nostalgia

One of the most heralded events in the recent history of the city was the resurrection of St. Sophia Cathedral, built by the Russians between 1907 and 1932 (Figure 11.2). Although the cathedral’s sturdy structure withstood its intended destruction during the Cultural Revolution, its empty hull became a warehouse for a nearby state-run department store, its windows were bricked up and saplings grew from the roof. Prefabricated concrete high-rises boxed the church in on all four sides, coming within yards of its walls, making the cathedral inaccessible and invisible from the street. For decades it remained the invisible center of the city, surrounded by decorative material stalls, an auto body shop, a pen factory, and apartments for city government employees, until the Beijing government designated the cathedral a national cultural heritage site in 1996 as part of a nationwide campaign to protect historical sites. This prompted a newspaper article about the “hidden” cathedral that ignited donations from locals to restore the church (Zheng et al., 1997). Local corporations, individual businesses as well as workers from nearby department stores donated money to restore the cathedral and renovate the square (Li Debin, 1998: 263). A total of 12,000,000 yuan (approximately US $1.5 million) was eventually assembled (Liu and Zheng, 1997), and the cathedral regained its visibility in 1997. The change was dramatic—the surrounding buildings were torn down, a new “Harbin Architecture Square” conspicuously highlighted the cathedral with a huge new fountain at its entrance, and the opening celebrations were suitably spectacular.

With this municipal government decision, the European-looking space was assigned a new meaning as the embodiment of culture and art and was re-presented to the public as the proud heritage of the city. As Wang Guangdao, then the mayor of Harbin, repeatedly pointed out, “the purpose of historical preservation of St. Sophia Cathedral is to restore the architecture unique to Harbin and turn it into a tourist destination” (Haerbinshi jianzhu weiyuanhui, 1997: 98). Travel guidebooks to Harbin present the cathedral on their cover pages, proclaiming the city’s exotic atmosphere. The cathedral houses the Harbin Architecture Art Centre and, along with the restored nearby Central Avenue, now presents itself as the center and symbol of the city, bustling with locals and tourists alike, signifying “civilization, culture, and art” (Li Debin, 1998: 262).
after its opening, traces the development of Harbin from the late nineteenth century, when the Russians started to build railroads, to the early 1940s. Over 300 photographs are arranged around two scale models in the center of the exhibition. One is St. Nicholas Church, the central Orthodox Church in Harbin destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and the other is St. Sophia Cathedral. By placing St. Nicholas Church at the center of the exhibit accompanied by a mournful textual commentary on its destruction, its absence sends a strong message to visitors. The caption for the old photograph of St. Nicholas reads: "The scale of the church was magnificent, and its exquisite architectural details were world renowned. It was built in a Russian style, typical wooden well casting structures with steeples. It was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution." One's eyes then shift to the enlarged photographs with descriptive captions covering all walls, twisting through small alcoves as the history of Harbin unfolds. Brand-new reproductions of Orthodox icons look down at the visitor, in mocking contrast to the battered ceiling of the cathedral, its faded frescos and peeling paint evoking the days before restoration. The sources of the pictures demonstrate not only how cosmopolitan this city once was but also the unusual nature of this exhibit in light of the official narrative of the colonial past: many of these pictures are in the form of old postcards proudly produced by Russians and Japanese in several languages (commonly in Russian, Japanese, and English) in their attempt to show off their modern monuments. Most postcards show monumental buildings and boulevards with printed captions that portray the city as cosmopolitan, grand, and modern.

The tone of the exhibition is nostalgic for the era affectionately referred to as "Old Harbin" (lao Haerbin), typified by the evocation in the preface to the exhibition (in both Chinese and English): "Old pictures are true records of what happened, and they provide accurate answers to unsettled issues in history...Leaping over time and space, here we have reproduced her ethos and beauty."56 After a long description of the cosmopolitan past, the preface reminds the viewer in a few brief sentences to remember the difficult years under the Russians and Japanese.57 Then it closes by encouraging the visitors to interpret and ponder the messages contained within the exhibition. The tone is significantly different from other historical museums in the city, such as the Heilongjiang Province Museum, the Northeast Martyr Memorial Museum, and the Japanese Army Unit 731 Museum, where the stated goal of the exhibitions is to educate the public in anti-imperial discourse and call attention to past tragedies and atrocities.

The exhibition is organized into three sections with introductory descriptions: "The Early Days of the City: The End of the Nineteenth Century," "The Old View of the City: The Penetration of Western Culture," and "Quotidian Vignettes: The Early Twentieth Century." The first section attempts to
Old Harbin reflects the deeply felt and widely shared resentment toward the Chinese Communist Party among common people in Harbin:

Without the presence of the resentment towards the current government, there wouldn't be nostalgia (huajiju) for Old Harbin. The sudden flourishing of the Old Harbin industry in recent years speaks of such bitterness among common people here. Those elderly people I chat with when I exercise in the park in the morning gnash their teeth in rage and are bitterly angry with the Communist Party (yaoya qiechi tongtong hen Gongchandang), mainly because of political corruption. Of course, Chinese society experienced serious problems at other times in the past, especially during the Cultural Revolution. But now people are very bitter because some are milking the open market policy while many others are left behind and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. When everybody was poor, it was much easier to accept the authorities. But now that people see the wealth, which is distributed quite unevenly, they cannot but feel resentful at the Party.

Yet, criticism of the Party by local intellectuals is rarely stated explicitly in their published works, despite the fact that these intellectuals, over numerous meals we shared, openly and eagerly expressed their views to me, a researcher from abroad, whom they considered a safe audience for their frustrations. Among the few exceptions to this intellectual silence in the public realm are Zeng Yizhi, a senior journalist of the local newspaper, Heilongjiang ribao [Heilongjiang Daily], and Ji Fenghui, a local historian at the Heilongjiang Province Archive. Zeng Yizhi contributes weekly full-page feature articles under the series title, "Cheng yu ren" ["The city and the people"] in Heilongjiang Daily. Through unfolding human dramas surrounding historical architecture, her strong nostalgia for Old Harbin is redirected to criticizing the current government for its injustice, political corruption, and what she sees as modernization without serious consideration for Harbin's rich historical inheritance. Her articles receive immediate and passionate responses from the readers. “The municipal government doesn’t like me,” she said breaking into a big laugh:

Because they know I’m not afraid of criticizing what they are doing. These days when I try to call up the government, they just hang up when they recognize my voice. But I receive a lot of phone calls and letters from my readers, who support and encourage me with great enthusiasm… I want the people in Harbin to be aware of what they are losing in this rapid urban transformation. The historical preservation policy is limited to superficial preservation of certain areas.

capture the role of the Chinese community in constructing Harbin as a city. Many photos show one-storey buildings in Fujiaidian, the Chinese district populated predominantly by migrant construction workers from Shangdong Province. The second section demonstrates the influence of Western culture on the city’s architecture, claiming that the variations and numbers of Harbin architectural styles are unique in the world. The captions for the photographs, in Chinese only, state the original name of the building, year built, the name of the architect if known, and the current name of the building with a brief description of the style. Some captions mention that the buildings were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The last section depicts Western culture in the daily life of Harbin in the early twentieth century. The accompanying text positively points out how “the liberal thought that came along with the Western culture lashed out against the corrupted feudal social elements.” The exhibition closes with a strong tone of celebration of the cosmopolitanism that existed in Old Harbin. To those used to historical museums in China, the tone of the exhibit is quite unusual, and probably contributes to its sustained popularity compared with other historical museums in the city, which are nearly empty.

I found no lack of echoes of the nostalgic sentiment of the photography exhibition among local intellectuals. Dinner-table conversation with local historians often revolved around contrasting Old Harbin, which they praise for its openness, diversity, and culturally rich life, to Harbin today, which they feel constrains their intellectual pursuits and cultural life in general. One historian in his mid-40s, known in local intellectual circles for being very careful about what he says in public, spoke eagerly about how cosmopolitan and multicultural Harbin once was:

Can you believe that in the 1920s there were more than one hundred foreign language newspapers in this city? Diverse cultures really flourished in Harbin at that time. Yet look at Harbin today. We are so closed, provincial, and backward. And the intellectual culture is dead. We cannot say what we want to say, you see.

Then, after listening to my conversation with his teenage daughter at the dinner table, he murmured: “With kids like her you really get what they are thinking about. We [adults] think twice or three times before speaking out loud about anything.” As a historian of Harbin, Old Harbin for him is a mirror through which he articulates what is lacking today. Nostalgia for Old Harbin is a displaced form of social criticism of contemporary Harbin, which many historians feel is lacking cosmopolitan openness, the value the city once embraced.

Another intellectual put it more bluntly, describing how nostalgia for
without real understanding of the history of Harbin. Harbin was once an extremely culturally rich society. It was very diverse and of different nationalities and cultures, something we should emulate now to create new Harbin. I want to bring out these stories buried beneath the rapid urban reconfiguration.

With a sincere tone of respect, many intellectuals in Harbin use almost identical phrases to describe this energetic, petite woman in her mid-40s with an open smile that brightens up several square feet around her: “She is a person with a very strong sense of justice, and she is not afraid of the authorities.” She treasures reminders from Old Harbin, and was very eager to take me along on her journalistic excursions to trace and capture moments of the disappearing past—from neglected architectural jewels that did not receive preservation status, to celebrating Russian Orthodox Easter with the last living Russians from the Old Harbin era. For her, these reminders are not merely testimony of the Harbin that once was but hope for Harbin’s future.

Xenophobia (pái wài zhùyì), often found within the municipal government despite its stated policy goal to turn Harbin into a “major international economic city of Northeast China,” is a source of frustration for many historians of Harbin, which in turn makes Old Harbin look rosier to their eyes than it might have been. The local historian Ji Fenghui, also in his mid-40s, is another vocal critic of government xenophobia through his nostalgic accounts of Old Harbin. Writing on the encounter between Harbin and the West in the early twentieth century in his book, Huashuo Haerbin [Talk about Harbin], Ji highlights positive Western influences on Old Harbin (Ji, 2002a). He claims that Western civilization destroyed feudalism in China while “normalizing” Chinese perspectives by bringing in such concepts as democracy, humanity, freedom, and the rule of law. As a result of this encounter, Ji argues, Harbin developed a “uniquely tolerant and peaceful attitude” (Ji, 2002a: 101). He goes on to claim “in the face of rising nationalism around the world, citizens of Harbin did not have strong exclusionist sentiments or mass movements against foreigners” (Ji, 2002a: 101). His embracing of Old Harbin as an open-minded, cosmopolitan city is in turn used to criticize post-Liberation Communist discourse in China, which revolves around anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist perspectives. He writes:

Since the Liberation, historians of Harbin produced a considerable amount of work on exposing the imperialists’ invasion and praising people’s anti-imperialist struggles. This is entirely accurate and necessary; however, it only captures one aspect of Chinese and foreign relations in Harbin. The fact that the Chinese and Western people built friendships and together constructed and developed Harbin is also an important aspect of Chinese and foreign relations in Harbin. (Ji, 2002a: 103)20

He argues that the post-Liberation discourse, which he sees mired in political struggles, fails to capture certain aspects of capitalism beyond imperialist invasion:

In the academy in Harbin, studies of Harbin from the perspectives of modern social development and political struggles are plentiful. Yet perspectives considering cultural development remain weak. As a result, the study of Harbin’s historical development tends to be subsumed by the theoretical restraints set by political struggles. In this process, they emphasize the brutal invasion by capitalism while omitting another aspect of capitalism, which is pervasive. And this aspect influenced Harbin greatly. (Ji, 2002a: 105)

Despite his blunt and bold written critiques, Ji is a nervous man, and belongs to the same generation as Zeng Yizhi and other influential historians of Harbin—the first college graduating class after the Cultural Revolution—and he experienced the underground democracy movement in 1981. “Many people got arrested, but I escaped from being busted because I wasn’t one of the big guys in the movement,” he recalled of his youth. “I’m not interested in radical change any longer. Rather, I’d like to gradually change the ways in which people think about history through my writings.” He wants to “slowly and quietly brainwash his readers” so that “they can see alternative narratives of history to the official one.” This is what he calls “dixia faxin”—underground activity in the bright daylight—while securing political protection by cultivating networks of personal connections (guanxi).21 I was wondering why his book did not bear his name anywhere except on the library information page, as if to hide himself from the public. The book has the appearance of a volume edited by a group of people. Ji explained to me that these people are the protective umbrella (bāohūsān) in case the content of the book upsets the authorities.

I paid 1,000 yuan [approximately US $120, about half of his monthly salary and more than what average workers in Harbin make monthly] to ask this politically influential person to provide calligraphy for the title of the book and to sign the preface. It works this way in China. I almost got arrested by the Security Bureau with my first book because I didn’t do this.
became crossroads of foreign trade in the early twentieth century. Tens of thousands of foreigners settled in this well-known international trading city and constructed a large number of Western-style buildings, which defined the characteristics of the city . . .

The origin of the city is left intentionally vague. As a gesture toward the criticism of the colonialist historical perspective, the origin of Harbin is sought in the Jin Dynasty. Yet the birth of Harbin as a modern city is marked by the advent of the Russians in 1898, as the following explanation for the section "The Development Process" clearly states: "The construction of the Russian Chinese Eastern Railway in 1898 transformed a small fishing village into a modern city." Here, Harbin's supposed civilization before the Russians is reduced to a small fishing village, an issue hotly debated in the historians' debate.

Then, in the following section on the "development process" of Harbin, instead of tracing the development of the city after 1949, visitors walk past panels after panels of enlarged pictures of factories, bridges, highways, skyscrapers, and apartments built in the late 1990s to demonstrate how modernized Harbin has become. The scale model in the center of Harbin's future shimmers like Shanghai, the clear winner in new capitalist China. The missing "development process" of the city between 1949 to the mid-1990s ironically corresponds to the sudden disappearance of the "West" in historical writings of this period. Even more ironic, the absence of photographic representations from this period anywhere in this exhibit—except for the ghostly apparition of memories of the Cultural Revolution in the old photography exhibit upstairs and the few black and white photographs of destroyed colonial structures in the section on the "historical cultural city"—corresponds to the absent history of this period. No photography, no history. It is as if the historical narrative of the city bypasses communist China, connecting cosmopolitan Old Harbin directly to the present-day Harbin of economic spectacles.

This connection was clearly made by the mayor in his speech celebrating the renovated cathedral. Referring to the photography exhibition in the cathedral, the mayor drew a striking link between Old Harbin, which he described as an open city (kaifang de chengshi) and contemporary Harbin under the open economic policy (Haerinshijianzhu weiyuanhui, 1997: 41). Terms such as "openness," "level of culture," and "economic development" all amount to the idea that Harbin architectural culture would achieve "the synthesis of cityscape and the open economic policy" (Haerinshijianzhu weiyuanhui, 1997: 41). The discourse of wending is deployed repeatedly as an ideological device for the Communist government to control the meaning of the "West" set loose by the preservation policies.

Historically, Harbin was once part of the Jin Dynasty, the birthplace of the Qing Dynasty. With the construction of the Russian Chinese Eastern Railway and the influence of the two world wars, Harbin

as indicated, public criticism of the authorities, especially by prominent intellectuals, remains dangerous terrain. When I spoke with the director of the Japanese Unit 731 Museum, located on the site of the infamous Japanese Unit 731 human experimental laboratory on the outskirts of Harbin, I mentioned that nostalgia for Old Harbin could be interpreted as displaced social criticism. To this, the director, who had held a high government position before taking this job, reacted alarmingly: "Who gave you that idea, tell me the name of the person who told you this!" My reply that it was something I thought could be the case calmed him down immediately, but he pressed the point that it was not at all the case in Harbin. As his secretary was taking detailed notes of our conversation throughout our meeting, I asked him at the end of our talk if I could have a copy of these notes for accurate recounting of our discussion. After lengthy deliberation he rejected my request. This example illustrates the stakes with which the historians who organized the Old Harbin photography exhibit are playing.

Although a drama of its own making, the making-visible of the colonial heritage in the cityscape indeed brought turmoil within the Harbin municipal government. After previewing the photography exhibit, one high government official complained that the exhibit had too many pictures of Western structures. His utterance echoed concerns for the "colonialist historical view" expressed in the historians' debate, and anticipated the embarrassing cancellation of the centenary celebration in 1998.\textsuperscript{22} In St. Sophia today, in addition to the photography exhibit of Old Harbin, there is a separate underground exhibit of the present and the future of Harbin, added in 2001 together with an exhibit of religious artifacts recently unearthed in the crypt. Almost hidden down a dark staircase in the dimly lit basement with its odor of cool concrete, visitors are greeted by an illuminated scale model of the future of Harbin: a city of skyscrapers, apartment blocks, and highways. The exhibit consists of three parts, and the first section, entitled "Historical Cultural City," displays enlarged pictures of colonial structures, both present and absent, the former in color, the latter in black and white. The main part of the exhibit is the last two sections, which illustrate the urban renewal and historical preservation in the past ten years. The preface to this Chinese-language exhibit is reminiscent of the political turmoil surrounding the celebration of Harbin's centenary in 1998. It reads: in St. Sophia today, in addition to the photography exhibit of Old Harbin, there is a separate underground exhibit of the present and the future of Harbin, added in 2001 together with an exhibit of religious artifacts recently unearthed in the crypt. Almost hidden down a dark staircase in the dimly lit basement with its odor of cool concrete, visitors are greeted by an illuminated scale model of the future of Harbin: a city of skyscrapers, apartment blocks, and highways. The exhibit consists of three parts, and the first section, entitled "Historical Cultural City," displays enlarged pictures of colonial structures, both present and absent, the former in color, the latter in black and white. The main part of the exhibit is the last two sections, which illustrate the urban renewal and historical preservation in the past ten years. The preface to this Chinese-language exhibit is reminiscent of the political turmoil surrounding the celebration of Harbin's centenary in 1998. It reads:
Colonial structures are renewed as an aesthetic category embodying culture and civilization. Because the discourse of wenming embraces the aesthetic element of the architectural heritage from the colonial era, it simultaneously reveals a past whose history was repressed under the Mao era, and itself represses the new politics of inheritance and the history of the postwar era.

One sees such layers of repressive politics not only in the narrative of the Old Harbin photography exhibition, but also in speeches by other officials at the ceremony celebrating the project's completion. While the mayor briefly mentioned colonial violence in his speech, all the other officials displaced the sensitive issue of colonialism with the seemingly less controversial issue of religion by arguing the appropriateness of putting religious architecture under historical preservation. The anti-imperialist discourse, omnipresent under the Mao era when the authorities repressed the presence of the West, is now reduced to the issue of religion, covering what it means to elevate such a material witness to imperialism as St. Sophia to the city's most prominent symbol.

The discourse of wenming has also penetrated the local population. Local residents of Harbin, when asked about their unique heritage, talk about colonial structures in the language of aesthetics. They regard them as art while discounting their colonial symbolic meaning. "Culture is culture," or "Art is art," is the oft-heard response to the question of whether certain objects represent the colonial domination of Harbin. Most of all, people are proud of their newly restored beauty. As soon as locals found out that I was not from Harbin they would ask, "have you seen St. Sophia yet?" "What do you think?” they asked eagerly, and were very satisfied to hear my praise. A Japanese woman told me that her taxi driver, upon finding out that she was a visitor from Japan, insisted that he drive her around St. Sophia before sending her to a hotel and circled around the cathedral as if to show off his baby.

Yet Harbin's historical preservation policy has a double face, for the other face of preservation is the relentless demolition of old structures and neighborhoods that do not fall within the preservation policy. In the rush to urban renewal, historic buildings disappear overnight, while those selected receive princely revitalization through structural and cosmetic renovation. High-rises replace old structures, drastically shifting Harbin's skyline from early twentieth-century curved lines of cupolas to late-modern boxy fortresses shooting up toward the sky. More recently constructed luxury buildings now echo motifs of colonial structures, creating what they call "European-style" architecture. Harbin's nouveau riche purchase grand luxury condominiums in these full service, European-style buildings with modern amenities. Yet the majority of the population is stuck between historical preservation and the newly available "modern life" (xiandai shenghuo). Most live in gray, rusty, multi-storey Communist-style walk-up buildings built in the 1970s and 1980s. Concrete walls are cracked and stained, dimly lit hallway lights flicker if they work at all, and many apartments do not have baths. The supply of water and electricity is never reliable, and the fundamental shortage of these resources makes their allocation a political matter, subject to political corruption. In the impoverished district of Daowai, which was once Fujadian in Old Harbin, a shantytown spreads along the river. Shacks are built with patchworks of cinder blocks, pieces of wood, cardboard, or whatever is available to shield residents from the elements. Patched up cardboard ceilings barely protect inhabitants from the harsh winters, where temperatures regularly drop to 30 degrees Fahrenheit below zero. Unemployed middle-aged men and women with expressionless faces and sunken eyes stand on dusty unpaved street corners with handwritten cardboard signs hanging from their necks, which read "plumbing," "welding," or "mechanic," hoping to get a day's labor. In downtown Harbin, many men and women in ragged and faded clothes line up on sidewalks to sell roasted sunflower seeds and pine nuts from dusty baskets. They are the unemployed, most likely from privatized state-run companies, who receive a monthly subsidy of 200 yuan (approximately US $75 and about a quarter of what average workers make in Harbin) from the city for selling these goods on the streets.

It is in this socio-economic context that the effectiveness of the wenming discourse exceeds the prescribed disciplinary power of the party-state through its civilizing practices. What we observe in Harbin is how the wenming discourse, which is a discourse of lack as well as that of transformation, slips into another discourse of lack: nostalgia for cosmopolitan Old Harbin. The government-endorsed wenming discourse has taken the form of nostalgia for Old Harbin, and this sense of loss is used to criticize the current government. Here, we are talking about a sense of loss without first-hand experience—the majority of Harbin's population never experienced Old Harbin. Hence their sense of loss is of something already lost before their time, an imagined loss that took place long ago. Despite its imaginary nature, however, the sense of loss is exacerbated by the disappearing physical landscape of Old Harbin through urban renewal. The urban space is what turns an imaginary loss into a real sense of loss, bridging the loss in the past to the present. The reappearance of Old Harbin through historical preservation policy and the disappearance of Old Harbin through urban renewal make nostalgia for Old Harbin an authentic experience. Hence in Harbin, nostalgia emerges across a spatial lag, which translates a supposed temporal lag—a mechanism behind nostalgia (Ivy, 1995: 95)—into visibility and tactility in the everyday. While the government's intent to turn Harbin's architectural inheritance into capital did increase revenues from tourism and invigorate the real estate market, the
proliferation of Old Harbin nostalgia as a result of the preservation policy has produced more than money. Old Harbin nostalgia has articulated a lack in the present, and, as a result, become a displaced forum for criticizing the party-state vis-à-vis the image of cosmopolitan Old Harbin.

**The Resurrection of St. Nicholas Church**

The simultaneous workings of the *wenming* discourse—legitimizing the pedagogical party-state in the reform era as well as generating nostalgia for cosmopolitan Old Harbin as a displaced form of social criticism—bracket the Mao era. It is as if the embrace of the city's architectural inheritance effaces the lived experience of this period. Yet the logic of inheritance has not let the city capitalize on its inheritance without paying interest on its debt. In the process of excising the Mao era, the preservation policy and Old Harbin nostalgia have unexpectedly revealed the violence of the Cultural Revolution. The same policy that exalts some colonial structures highlights the absence of others. This newly recognized lack is supplemented by various forms of reproductions such as the scale model of St. Nicholas Church within St. Sophia, and enlarged photographs of other structures destroyed during the Cultural Revolution with captions plainly stating the historical fact.

One of the byproducts of the sudden public interest in Old Harbin in the 1990s is the first public appearance of a set of four photographs that capture the very moment of destruction of the St. Nicholas Church by the Red Guard in 1966. In 2000, *Xinwanbao* [New Evening News] published a special issue portraying 100 years of Harbin with over 100 photographs. Although primarily focused on Old Harbin before Liberation, unlike the St. Sophia Cathedral photography exhibit that stops in the 1940s, this special issue covers the era after 1949. The early development of Harbin is traced with numerous colonial structures, quite similar to the photo exhibit in St. Sophia Cathedral, but the section on Old Harbin is followed by four striking black and white photographs of St. Nicholas Church and its ruins in 1966 (Figure 11.3). In the first picture, St. Nicholas stands draped with banners and slogans held by men occupying the structure while onlookers surround the church. The white banners dangling from railings of the Church remind one of a traditional funeral scene, which was, in a sense, to follow a moment later. The second picture shows a close up of the cupola with two young men climbing down from the very top where they had placed a national flag and a Red Guard flag beneath it. In the next picture the cupola lies on the ground as if dead, with flushed faces of young Red Guard members clearly shown. The last shot captures a triumphant funeral march with the cupola in the back of a shiny black truck guarded by students with shining eyes.

*Figure 11.3 The destruction of St. Nicholas Church in 1966 during the Cultural Revolution (photos by Wan Jiyao).*

These pictures, taken by the photo journalist Wan Jiyao for *Heilongjiang Daily*, had been hidden deep in his closet for more than 30 years. They are the only remaining photographic traces of the 1966 incident except for those possibly hidden and locked in the city archive. Wan managed to hide
his film, while the authorities destroyed the pictures that his colleague took from the same spot. The violence that these pictures evoke in this otherwise nostalgic and celebratory special issue is almost anachronistic. Time is out of joint, but for a reason. In his discussion on Japan's war responsibility, philosopher Takahashi Tetsuya points out that chronology (chronos + logos: logic of time) is a force behind turning forgetting into normalcy, while anachronism (ana + chronos: movement against time's order) works against the logic of forgetting (Takahashi, 1999: 64–74). Anachronism is what comes back when the logic of forgetting starts to dominate people's mind, and it demands that the work of mourning be finished. One wonders if these photographs signal the return of the repressed after more than three decades of collectively suppressing memories of the Cultural Revolution.

As many have observed, Cultural Revolution nostalgia emerged in 1990s China, with the proliferation of Cultural Revolution theme restaurants (slightly upgraded versions of peasant food surrounded by décor full of reproduced slogans and posters from the era), the publication of memoirs and photography books, and online chat groups to name a few examples (G. Yang, 2003; 2005; Davies, 2005; Hubbert, 2005; Yue, 2005). Yet a closer look at these nostalgic phenomena shows how the proliferation of certain forms of Cultural Revolution memories predominantly function to mourn the present. What is mourned through their nostalgic recalling of the era is not the Cultural Revolution per se but the social relationships under strain as a result of China's rapid transformation in the last decade. Even in its nostalgic appearance, the Cultural Revolution is constantly displaced without being actually signified. As a result, it hardly becomes the object of mourning. Guobin Yang, for instance, demonstrates how the recent proliferation of Cultural Revolution nostalgia among ordinary people and former Red Guards, especially in cyberspace, is a form of protest for the recent drastic socioeconomic change in which this generation feels left behind (G. Yang, 2003; 2005).

Likewise, through his analysis of the production and consumption of a widely popular publication, *Zhiqing luo zhaopian* (*Zhiqing Old Photos*) (Xue and Zhang, 1998), which nostalgically illustrates the daily life of sent-down educated youth (zhiding) during the Cultural Revolution, David J. Davies shows how these photos evoke present-day difficulties and struggles of the former zhiqing generation in the reform era (Davies, 2005). He points out that the *zhiding* photos are "future-oriented photography" for they "were not taken for memorial value, but attempted to capture ... images of the desired future" (Davies, 2005: 106). The young faces captured in these pictures are almost uniformly beaming with youthful hope, a strong sense of fulfillment, and a knowing sense of direction. Some are taken among themselves in a group, some with local peasants, and most with a backdrop of a raw and harsh natural environment. As Davies sums up, in "future-oriented photography," individuals became abstract props such as workers and peasants in this idealized social order (Davies, 2005: 106–108).

In contrast, the four pictures of the destruction of St. Nicholas Church in Harbin were taken with a journalist's instinct to capture the present. Wan Jiabo was attending a conference in the International Hotel facing St. Nicholas Church when the Red Guard started to surround the church. His location provided a perfect vantage point from which to observe the unfolding of this historical event, and instinctively he and his colleague from the newspaper started taking pictures from the window. Unlike "future-oriented photography," these four pictures mercilessly lift the veil of socialist utopian imagery. The feelings of anachronism and anxiety that these four grotesque photographs evoke derive from the concrete individuality betrayed in these pictures. At the same time, in their exposure of individuality, the photos also convey a sense of collective loss. Whether you were the former Red Guard on the cupola or one of the onlookers surrounding the church, the indisputable loss of the physical body of the city's symbolic landscape is something they can safely share in mourning.

In Harbin, the proliferation of the Old Harbin nostalgia has vastly overshadowed the Cultural Revolution nostalgia. Instead of the Cultural Revolution nostalgia, what I sensed strongly and widely is a persistent desire to remain silent about the Cultural Revolution. Many intellectuals I encountered had been "sent down" either to Harbin or its surrounding areas and settled in the city after the Cultural Revolution. Most of them talk reluctantly and briefly about their experiences without giving specificities. In their narratives, proper names are absent except for categorical nouns. One professor, who was recounting vivid accounts of wartime and its aftermath, paused with a clear sign of hesitation on his face when I asked him about the local situation during the Cultural Revolution. After a deep silence, he finally opened his mouth: "talking about that era is really difficult and tricky because people from all sides now have to work together as colleagues. Not to talk about it is a way to conduct our daily life without bringing up unnecessary memories of who did what." Only in complete silence about the past can they work and live together as a former student on top of the cupola or an apprehensive onlooker.

Despite official acknowledgment that the Cultural Revolution was a mistake, its critique remains strictly controlled by both the government and individuals themselves, who are afraid of conjuring up unnecessary ghosts. As a result, memories of horror remain fragmented and knowledge of its scale unavailable to most individuals beyond their own experiences. Yet for the Cultural Revolution generation, now in charge of every aspect of socio-political life in Harbin, wounds from the "ten years of turmoil," as it
is often referred to, are more tangible than those from the 14-year Japanese occupation, whose effects they experienced indirectly.

The absent colonial structures thus potentially become a site for collective mourning for an unsharable past. Among hyper-stylized photographic memories of the city during the Cultural Revolution, mostly in the form of Mao portraits, shots of Red Guards marching in uniform, or portraits of youths posing in idealized socialist moments, the re-presentation of the death of St. Nicholas Church provides a site for mourning. Despite general unwillingness to talk about the Cultural Revolution, many people openly and mournfully expressed their regrets at the loss of St. Nicholas. A native Harbinite in his late 60s told me while showing me his collection of old pictures of Harbin, including a black and white photograph of St. Nicholas:

After the Cultural Revolution, sometime in the early 1980s, when Wang Huacheng was the mayor of Harbin, many people in the US told him that they would be willing to donate money to rebuild St. Nicholas Church... Even nowadays, people ask me to lend them this old picture of St. Nicholas, mostly for planning to rebuild the church. For instance, one architecture professor called me to send him a clear picture of the church in its early days... Poster-size blow-up photographs of St. Nicholas became available in the market in the 1950s, which many people bought, including myself... Now I feel that the church shouldn’t be rebuilt, since that would make us feel regretful. Our generation grew up with the sound of the bell from the church...

This deeply held anxious desire to rebuild St. Nicholas has found an ironic medium for reconciliation, at least temporarily, in Harbin’s famous ice festival. Every year, a life-size St. Nicholas Church is meticulously resurrected with bricks of ice and lit up in dreamy pastel colors as one of the main pieces of ice sculpture to greet the locals as well as visitors from around the world. In its resurrection with electric cosmetics to highlight its beauty, St. Nicholas Church stands not as the victim of the Cultural Revolution but as the embodiment of the glorious Old Harbin and Harbin’s future. Its ephemeral yet grand presence in this favorite winter festivity epitomizes the simmering longing for its origin unencumbered by the official discourse. Hence St. Nicholas Church has become what Marilyn Ivy calls “a memorial marker, a monument to an absence, to a loss that must be perpetually recovered” (Ivy, 1995: 95, emphasis original). Yet the loss itself is constantly displaced by the recovery of something else. Anxiety and anticipation for the resurrection of St. Nicholas Church conjures up the Cultural Revolution, while its resurrection signifies Harbin’s lost glory.

As if to console the ghost, there was an unofficial offer recently by one of the former students photographed on the cupola, now a man of fortune in Hong Kong, to rebuild St. Nicholas, although the city government declined his offer. Hence the people in Harbin continue to walk around the graveyard of St. Nicholas, now called Red Flag Square, blemished by what many describe as “one of the ugliest” structures in the city. In the center of a huge rotary bustling with people, cyclists, buses, and cars crossing and circling all in a mad rush, galvanized iron sheets form the ceiling and air ducts for a three-storey underground shopping mall on the site of the church. Covered with dust and exhaust, its functional existence, devoid of any gesture to aesthetic pleasure, is more noticeable than ever in contrast to the virtual resurrections of St. Nicholas Church taking place all across the city.

The rehabilitation of St. Nicholas Church as the embodiment of both glorious Old Harbin and the embarrassment of the Cultural Revolution (as the fallen idol) hints at the “return” of the absent Mao era. Unfamiliarity is bestowed rather on the Mao era and the party-state as its embodiment — that is, China’s supposed national origin instead of colonial Harbin. What is foreign, or what is frightening, and what is full of secrets, is the Mao era, while the supposedly foreign Old Harbin, with its “atmosphere of a foreign country,” is perceived as home-like and accorded the status of authentic origin.

Inheritance and Betrayal

Despite the government’s attempt to assert Chinese Harbin in the multi-volume publication of the history of Harbin accompanying the uncelebrated centenary in 1998 (Duan and Ji, 1998; Gao et al., 1998; Li Debin, 1998; Zhang, 1998), the historical preservation policy has highlighted Harbin’s unique postcoloniality, which is most notably observed in recent historiographical practices by local intellectuals as an integral part of the proliferating Old Harbin nostalgia. In analyzing the historiography in the late 1980s Harbin, Søren Clausen and Stig Thøgersen observed that history-writing had become rewriting history for the purpose of asserting Chineseness in a city full of memories of imperialism: “Contemporary historiography in Harbin is by necessity a rewriting with the purpose of writing China and the Chinese back into the history and establishing a proper and dignified role for them in this City of Many Masters” (Clausen and Thøgersen, 1995: xii–xiii, emphasis original).

More than a decade has passed since their observations of this renewed interest in local history, which showed shifting historiographical practices among local historians toward a more forceful assertion of Chineseness. Government-sponsored history continues to revolve around anticolonial discourse, as the multi-volume publication demonstrates. But if one looks at other forms of historical writing, many of which fall under the category
of coffee table books produced by professional historians, their nostalgic
tone indicates the emergence of a different type of writing practice. In
their efforts to highlight multicultural Old Harbin, references to colonial
violence and exploitation have receded in their narratives. Their nostalgic
accounts primarily revolve around Harbin’s rich social history, highlighting
the image of a colonial-yet-cosmopolitan Harbin. The imperialism por-
trayed in these historical narratives is quite different from the anti-imperial
discourse. Recent historical writings on “colonial” Harbin work to undo the
image of “Chinese” Harbin. Furthermore, these writings actually reveal a
certain absence of imperialist violence in the description of colonial Old
Harbin. For instance, in the introduction to Dongfang xiao Bali [Paris of the
East], a coffee table book with glossy pages with artistic shots of colonial
architecture, the author/photographer only briefly hints at imperialism and
moves quickly to describe how cosmopolitan the city once was:

... after the Tsarist Russia robbed China of the right to develop the
railway, Harbin developed around the Chinese Eastern Railway. In the
early twentieth century, Russia, England, Japan, Czechoslovakia etc.
opened up general consulates in Harbin, and Germany, France, Italy etc.
opened up consulates, and within fifty years Harbin developed
rapidly into a very unique international metropolis. (Song, 2001: 3)

These new historiographical practices thus demonstrate a significant shift
in their manifestation of postcoloniality from the form of asserting Chi-
neseness that Clausen and Thøgersen observed in the late 1980s.

Also unique about the recent resurfacing of postcolonial Harbin is how
Old Harbin is connected to the city’s future. Within this new discourse of
cosmopolitan Harbin, the colonial past is no longer contained within the
demarcated space of pre-history before Mao. Rather, as symbolized by the
reborn St. Sophia, Old Harbin provides the vital legacy and promise for
Harbin’s future success in the global economy. It is a belatedly acknow-
ledged postcolonial consciousness in a new guise, posing a potential threat
to the founding myth of the Chinese Communist Party. As the resurrection
of St. Nicholas Church epitomizes, the newly found yet twisted postcolo-
nality has made many locals acknowledge how uncanny the Mao era seems,
and uncomfortably raises questions about the party-state.

In her analysis of nostalgia for historic St. Petersburg in 1990s Russia,
which curiously resembles Old Harbin nostalgia, Svetlana Boym observes the
inside-out sensations evoked through this nostalgia: “For many local
residents, the historic St. Petersburg façades have become the private
architecture of their dreams; exteriors were internalized and appear more
intimate than their actual impoverished interiors” (Boym, 2001: 130).

Façades of colonial Harbin architecture also hide dilapidated interiors, the
material trace of the communist Harbin with its grey cracked walls, divided
rooms, and multiple households living in what was once a single-family
unit. What has become intimate and familiar to the locals is the foreign
looking exterior, while the interior—the lived experience of the Mao era—is
seen with great suspicion. It is as if the restoration of Western-style
structures has resulted in effacing the Mao era, reversing the effacement of
the West during the Mao era. With Old Harbin nostalgia, people’s desire
for attaining “modern life” (xiandai shenghuo) often takes what seems like a
pro-Western outlook by locating authenticity in the colonial era archi-
tecture. It should be emphasized that the anti-imperialist discourse is not
just government propaganda: for most locals, Japanese colonial violence
persists as trans-generational pain, whether directly or indirectly experi-
enced. Yet most locals do not seem to find a contradiction in harboring Old
Harbin nostalgia, which clearly undermines colonial violence, since, after
all, Old Harbin is their own.

Most of all, the politics of inheritance in Harbin demonstrates how a
deep, unarticulated postcolonial consciousness remains in this city, domi-
nated by visible traces of its colonial past. Much deeper, more textured and
complex than the official discourse of anti-imperialism, or passionate and
deep-rooted hatred for the Japanese, postcoloniality is now resurfacing
from Chinese society’s unconsciousness and has taken a form of something
intimate and seductive yet dangerous. The government and citizens alike in
Harbin are facing this delicate coupling of desire and disavowal that many
postcolonial societies have dealt with, and that most in China were shielded
from until recently. This crossroads of postsocialism and postcolonialism
signals the opening of a new chapter in Harbin’s history.

Notes
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Thøgersen, Tak Watanabe, Guobin Yang, Madeleine H. Zelin, Karin Zitterwitz, and the two
editors of this volume for their comments. Any errors are mine alone. In some cases in the
following text I have altered names and identifying details of individuals to protect their
identity. All the translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
2. See, for instance, Chen et al., 2001; Logan, 2001; Friedmann, 2005.
3. Arif Dirlik provides a concise overview of the term postcolonialism (Dirlik, 1994: 332). He
mentions three prominent uses of the term: (a) "as a literal description of conditions in the
formerly colonial societies"; (b) "as a description of a global condition after the period of
colonialism"; and (c) "as a description of a discourse on the above-named conditions that is
informed by the epistemological and psychic orientations that are products of those conditions. In the case of China, it is difficult to generalize about postcolonial conditions, since someInnerAsia and postcolonialism thus forces of imperialism more intensely than others. Northeast China is one of the regions most affected, first by the Russian expansion of railways and then by the Japanese-built Manchukuo in the first half of the twentieth century.  

4. Most postcolonial analyses come from studies of Hong Kong and Taiwan, which were subject to long-term direct foreign rule (see, for example, Ching, 2000), while China's experience with imperial forces is often described as "semicolonial" (Shih, 2001). Comparing the role of colonialism in shaping the narrative of the nation in India and China, Prasenjit Duara observes that the lack of postcoloniality in China stems from a relative lack of a colonial mindset among Chinese (Duara, 1995: 224). This, he argues, derived from the high degree of "imperialism in China" that continued to shape cultural and economic spheres while the cultural domain remained relatively free of it. Duara speculated on how this might be different in Northeast China, which experienced the Japanese direct rule. The case of Harbin examined here demonstrates that the seeming lack of postcoloniality is itself a product of postcolonial conditions. The configuration of postcolonial political and economic legacies present or absent in relation to how its colonial history becomes pronounced or muted as a referent for nation-building. The seeming absence of postcolonialism in China does not necessarily lead to the absence of postcolonial conditions in China. Rather, the invisibility of postcolonialism itself attests to the presence of postcoloniality in China. The opposing impulses reveal and reaffirm the colonial past as the past frozen in time, and disguise its present colonial legacies in the rhetoric of new campaigns such as "Wenming" (civilization) in the attempt to build a modern nation suitable for the age of globalization.  

5. Ann Anagnost (1997) analyses the discourse of civility (Wenming), which has become central to China's national imaginary in the post-Mao era. She shows how the colonial and postcolonial implications of this discourse, in which, for instance, Japan serves as a mimetic Other in China's national imaginary through "Wenming." Through her observation of silk factory workers in Hanzhou, Lisa Rofel (1999) locates the project of modernity in reference baroque within a framework of long and deferred postcolonial desire. Sunil Meen Hui Yang (2004) problematizes such postcolonial desires, which she calls "postcolonial complex." In her study of Chinese cinema, Rey Chow (1995) argues that cinema provides a site for postcolonial processes of intercultural translation. For her, it is a space where postmodernity and postcolonial convergence. It is where visibility, which attained centrality in shaping modernity and postcolonialism, has reshaped postmodern and postcolonial.  

6. In 1999, Wang Yuechuan, a literature professor at the prestigious Beijing University, introduced postcolonialism to the Chinese academia (Wang Yuechuan, 1999). His book presents the concept of postcolonialism as part of Western theory, yet acknowledges its potential usefulness in thinking about China in the present reform era when the nation has to face the question of cultural encounters.  

7. Marking 1949 as Chikin's zero hour is emphasized in school education as well. A nationally used junior high textbook on Chinese history, for example, divides the book into two sections, modern China and contemporary China. The former covers anticolonial struggles during the period between 1927 and 1949 under Guomindang and Japanese rule, and the latter covers the period after the establishment of the PRC (see Rennin jiaolou chubanshe lishi shi, 2002). In 2006-2007 the municipal government of Shanghai introduced experimental history textbooks, which present a drastically different historical perspective by locating China within a global context. The time may not be distant when the nationwide history textbooks follow suit.  

8. Thomas Luhansen offers a detailed analysis of a parallel discussion that took place within the internal government publication, Huaerbing shi [Harbin City Gazetteer], around the same time as this public discussion (Luhansen, 1998).  

9. Chinese Baroque-style buildings cover most of the Daorai district, the old Chinese district of Fujiansian in Old Harbin. These were built by Chinese construction workers, who worked for foreigners in downtown Harbin, through imitation of Western-style buildings. Many of them resemble Baroque style architecture, yet a close look reveals that detailed motifs were taken from materials familiar to their daily life. For Chinese Baroque architecture in Harbin, see Nishizawa, 1996: 38-42.  

10. This contrasts sharply with Korea, where the former Japanese colonial headquarters building in Seoul was demolished in the mid-1990s after a long debate (see Hashiya, 1995).  

11. For the privatization of the state-run heavy industry, see Hsien and Women, 2004.  

12. For the recent surge of protests in Northeast China, see Lee, 2000, Weston, 2002.  

13. Upon the commencement of the restoration of St. Sophia Cathedral in downtown Harbin, a local newspaper front page article sensationally reported how this beauty had long been "invisible"from the streets (Zeng et al., 1997).  

14. For the construction of "Chinese" history with the expense of silencing non-Han ethnic groups, see Clausen and Thagersten, 1995: 215-216.  

15. The government publication on the restoration of St. Sophia Cathedral explains that the cathedral became a target of destruction during the Cultural Revolution because it embodied "Huaerbing ji jiaju weiyi yuanyu," (Education "Harbin michaels xiang ji weiyi yuanyu, 1997: 135).  


17. It reads: "Glancing back at history, Harbin was originally the headquarters for the Imperial Russian invasion of China and later housed an exile community of White Russians. From the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, and from the puppet government controlled by the Japanese colonists to the period before Liberation, Harbin experienced decades of social upheaval. During these years, invasion and resistance persisted, and oppression and struggle never ceased."  

18. From the introduction to section three, "Quotidian Vignettes: The Early Twentieth Century."  

19. Some of her articles were compiled into a book (Zeng, 2003). "I had to make some changes to make my writing less edgy to be able to publish it at Hediaolong renmin Press, but the tone of the book retains my voice," she commented on her own book.  

20. See also Ji, 1996: 328.  


22. The society in which losing face is more than just an embarrassment, the cancellation was not a light-hearted decision to make. Other cities in northeast China, which share similar historical trajectories to Harbin, carefully watched the unfolding of the political drama. After a close examination of the case in Harbin, the city of Dalian decided to forego its plan to celebrate its centenary in 1999.  

23. The matter justified the city's decision to preserve a material witness to imperialism: "This way, we have attained cultural dignity and a break point for patriotic education and economic development. Some claimed that the cathedral was a material witness to imperial invasion, and I also feel that it is a reasonable argument. But what is more important is to sum up history [zongji lishi], develop oneself, and bring Harbin a new spiritual power" (see Haerbing ji jiaju weiyi yuanyu, 1997: 40).  

24. Contrary to what Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang observes in rural southeast China, where religion plays a key element in spatial politics (M. Yang, 2004), diverse religious practices are an integral part of daily rhythms of the life in Harbin. Not all religious structures were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and those remaining edifices now house ardent worshippers. For instance, along the Dongdaoshijie street, which stretches east from the Red Flag Square (where St. Nicholas Church used to be), lies a Catholic church, a Protestant church, and an Ukrainian Russian Orthodox church, all next to one another. On weekends, the Protestant church becomes packed with worshippers, while a small number of Russian and Chinese with Russian ancestries gather quietly in the Orthodox church. If you walk farther down the street, you will find a Buddhist temple next to a Confucian temple. In the center of the Daorai district (former Fujiansian in Old Harbin) stands a beautiful mosque, which offers a serene communal living space for the Muslim population in the city. A few blocks down stands a Protestant church, which is always lively with more than 100 ethnic Korean Chinese packed in this small space, cheerfully singing carols. This building was originally a synagogue in the early part of the twentieth century, and, although they put a wooden cross in front of the building, the remaining Star of David motif speaks of its former life.  

25. The general distrust for the government exacerbated the sense of panic and circulation of rumors when Harbin suffered the stoppage of its water supply in November 2005 as a result of a chemical factory explosion along the Songhua River, which became heavily polluted with toxic benzene.  

26. As Susan Stewart puts it, "nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological; the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past
continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack...nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face; a face that turns toward a future past, a past which has only ideological reality" (Stewart, 1993: 23).

27. Here, Takahashi is alluding to Derrida's work on mourning (see Derrida, 1994).

28. The destruction of St. Nicholas during the Cultural Revolution was followed by the construction of a "Working Class Cultural Revolution" memorial, which gained a common name "Ice candy tower", as it was in the shape of Harbin's famous ice candy. This political memorial, on which Lin Biao inscribed "Always keep in mind," was hurriedly destroyed overnight and replaced by a small hill covered with trees and flowers upon Zhou Enlai's visit to Harbin in 1972. This small hill, which Harbinites nicknamed "big grave," was later covered with metal sheets that were part of the roof for the three-story underground shopping mall (see Ji, 2002b).

29. It may not be a distant future when the Mao-era disappears from the official discourse much more bluntly than what we have seen in Harbin. The New York Times recently reported on the absence of Mao in the new history textbook, which was experimentally introduced in fall 2007 in Shanghai. The article describes a drastic change in the portrait of history. "Socialism has been reduced to a short, single chapter in the senior high school history course. Chinese Communism before the economic reform that began in 1979 is covered in a sentence. The text mentions Mao only once—in a chapter on etiquette" (see Kahn, 2006).

30. Derrida wrote: "The most familiar becomes the most disgusting. The economic, geological home or the okos, the nearby, the familiar, the domestic, or even the national (heimlich) frightens itself. It feels itself occupied, in the proper secret (Geheimnis) of its inside, by what is most strange, distant, threatening." (Derrida, 1994: 144-145). Derrida, of course, is alluding to Freud's essay on the uncanny. Freud illuminates the presence of seemingly opposing meanings, familiarities, and unfamiliarities, contained within the term "uncanny." In discussing the linguistic usage of das Heimliche [homely] and das Unheimliche [converse], Freud explains that "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of regression" (Freud, 1955: 241).

31. It should be noted, however, that these volumes portray Harbin in the 1920s as a very cosmopolitan city and claim that in recent years it has regained its past glories, drawing a link between the pre-1949 past and the present. We can see the institutional constraints in choosing the "right" discourse here, since some of the authors of these volumes are among the intellectuals who are behind the nostalgia industry. The 1920s was an ambiguous period in terms of political control of Harbin. Despite the official reversals of sovereignty to the Chinese as a result of the Russian Revolution that led to fragmentation of the Russian society, so-called warlords staked various claims while collaborating with foreign forces. As James H. Carter observes, "Chinese" rule in Harbin was a changeable patchwork of regional authorities rather than a centralized state bureaucracy" (Carter, 2002: 79). Chinese workers repeatedly revolted by foreign employers, which led to the Chinese exodus, 1904-1910 (Carter, 2002: 79).

32. The ensuing production of nostalgia took the form of historical publications, multilingual glossy books, photo exhibits, and newspaper series devoting columns to Old Harbin, all of which sought to portray Old Harbin as a uniquely cosmopolitan and culturally rich city in an era of turmoil and strong exclusionist sentiments. Part of the photography exhibition was turned into a book form in three languages (Chinese, English, and Japanese), nostalgically illustrating the glorious days of the city on glossy pages (Li Shuxiao, 2000). Local newspapers frequently publish articles on the remains of Old Harbin in the city. The most popular and influential of all is a weekly tabloid series, "The City and the People," by Zeng Yizhi, a senior journalist for Heilongjiang Daily. It was later turned into a book (Zeng, 2003). The Heilongjiang Province Academy of Social Science recently held an extensive photography exhibit entitled "Jews in Harbin," a bilingual (Chinese and English) book version of which followed the exhibition (Qu and Li, 2003). Details of daily life in Harbin are vividly described in Ji, 2002a.

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